



Contents

Title Page
Copyright
More P&P Variations
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
CHAPTER NINETEEN
CHAPTER TWENTY
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE
CHAPTER THIRTY

Compromised by Mr. Darcy
a Pride and Prejudice variation

Valerie Lennox

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**More P&P Variations
by Valerie Lennox**

**Mr. Darcy, the Beast
Mr. Darcy and the Lost Slipper
In the Tower with Mr. Darcy
Mr. Darcy's Downfall
Mr. Darcy, the Dance, and Desire
Pledged to Mr. Darcy
Mr. Darcy's Courtesan
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CHAPTER ONE

Propriety, or the appearance of it in the absence of the value itself, was of primary importance to Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. There was nothing else that took precedence to it in his concerns, save the safety and happiness of those he loved and cared for, of course. And since the arrival of Mr. George Wickham to his sitting room in his London townhouse was involved with both the appearance of propriety and his sister Georgiana's well-being, he could not deny the man an audience, though he wished to do so.

Mr. Wickham was a villain.

There was no other word for it. The man had no scruples and he seemed to delight in wrong-doing. Wickham's only concern was himself, and his money, though Darcy doubted that Wickham properly cared about finances, for if he did, he would not always be in such dreadful states when it came to money. It seemed to sift through Wickham's fingers like sand.

Darcy would have kept the man waiting, but he found that he would rather have it over with. Whatever it was that Wickham wanted to say to him, it must be said now and done. Darcy had enough on his mind without worrying about Wickham's part in all of it. So, he hastened to the sitting room to meet with the villain.

Once, Mr. Wickham had been Mr. Darcy's friend. They had been boys together, and there had been little malice between them then. But Wickham had grown beyond the boy he had been. He had grown in wickedness. Darcy knew not whether Wickham had always had such a seed within him or if he had been exposed to wickedness and been thus infected by its temptation, but the effect was the same.

Inside the sitting room, Mr. Darcy shut the doors to give them privacy, sending off the maid and telling her they would want no refreshment. Mr. Wickham was not staying.

"I say, Darcy," said Wickham from the opposite side of the room. "That seems rather hard. You have not asked if I am thirsty, after all."

Darcy faced the doors, drawing in a steadying breath, before he turned on Wickham, doing his best not to glower as he advanced on the other man.

Wickham's countenance was crossed with a look of alarm, and he began to back away, even though Darcy was not even within six feet of Wickham. "Now, see here, you can't murder me in your own sitting room. Think of the mess. Who would clean it up?"

"I'm not going to murder you," said Darcy.

"Well, I could hardly be blamed for thinking so, not with your aggressive manner, sir. Truly, you must learn to control your temper, I think. After all, it is not I who you should be angry with. I did not visit any trouble upon your sister."

"No, you merely witnessed it and decided to turn mercenary to still that wretched tongue of yours," said Darcy. "I well know what you are, Wickham. Don't try to convince me you are anything other than a worm."

"A worm? Truly?" Wickham drew himself up. "That is hardly fair, Darcy. I have done what I've done to save the reputation of the Darcy family. I have helped you."

Darcy snorted. "Why are you here? No doubt you have decided to change the terms of our arrangement again? You seem to have no qualms about altering it with whatever whim crosses your mind. How much do you want this time?"

"No, no, no." Wickham took a step toward him, spreading his hands. "I have not come for more money, Darcy. Truly, you wound me by thinking so poorly of me. You have very recently given me the payment that we agreed on. To think I could have spent such a sum so quickly is to think me a spendthrift."

Mr. Darcy didn't answer. He only regarded Mr. Wickham coolly.

"And what does that look mean?" Wickham lifted his chin. "You *do* think me a spendthrift."

"What I think, Mr. Wickham, is that you are talking quite a great deal, but that you are not saying anything of import. Please come to the point of your visit directly, or perhaps I *shall* murder you."

Mr. Wickham lifted a finger. "You are in a fine temper, Fitzwilliam."

Mr. Darcy's nostrils flared at the familiarity.

Wickham noticed, smiling, delighted.

Darcy had a brief and very satisfying fantasy about wringing his neck. It would solve at least half of his problems, not having to pander to this man. He really should simply kill him. He was a wealthy man, and he had resources. He could quite easily get rid of the body of a wretch like Wickham without suffering any consequences. He was certain of it. Almost certain.

No, he couldn't kill Wickham. He'd never killed a person, for one thing, and he'd never wrung anything's neck. Mr. Darcy was not sure of the true mechanics of it, but he imagined it to be more difficult than it was generally presented. Now, if he had a pistol in the room with him, a loaded pistol, then perhaps he would kill Mr. Wickham.

"... if you don't mind," said Mr. Wickham.

"What?" said Darcy. The man had been talking, and he'd been engaging in murderous thoughts instead of listening. Oh, Wickham brought out the worst in him. And it was a shame that he would only ever fantasize about murder, that he was too moral of a man to actually take a life. It was a shame indeed.

"I said that I was hoping you'd invite me to dinner here," said Wickham.

"What?" said Darcy again, but this time because he could not believe what had come out of Wickham's lips.

"Forgive me, but have you gone deaf? Do I really need to repeat myself a third time?"

"You cannot come to dinner at my house," said Mr. Darcy.

"Why not?"

"You... it is not the least bit proper."

"Yes, but I am quite well-versed in the manners of your class, Mr. Darcy. Your father saw to that. I have quite a bevy of skills that I have no use for. Give me a chance to put them to work for one evening."

"This is a lark for you?"

"I need introductions, Darcy, as you well know. If people have met me, then I can call on them, and I can—"

"You can swindle them," said Darcy, sneering at him. "No, out of the question. Besides, it would upset my sister."

"I can't see how having the gentleman who escorted your sister and her governess back from Ramsgate in the wake of the awful ordeal she went through could upset her. I assisted them both, and

they were happy to have me. Besides, when she was a small girl, she was awfully fond of me. You seem to think I caused her misery.”

“No, I know you did not,” said Darcy. Well, to be truthful, he knew no such thing. Georgiana would not speak about any of it. When the subject came up, she went white in the face, and she clamped her lips together, and nothing could induce her to speak. Nothing at all. Whatever had befallen her, it must be too horrible to talk about.

And all of it was Darcy’s fault.

He was her older brother, and he was her guardian. He ought to have protected her, but he’d left her to governesses and servants, and it had been Wickham who’d gathered up his broken little sister and brought her home.

“I don’t think you’re in a position to refuse me,” said Mr. Wickham.

“No, of course not,” said Darcy in a flat voice. “Because if I don’t do as you say, you’ll spread your stories about my sister all over London.”

“I’ll go to the papers,” said Wickham with a nasty smile.

Darcy knew those gossip rags did brisk business. They’d love to print a story about his family, and it would be wretched for poor Georgiana, who hadn’t even come out in society. She was so young for her life to be ruined. Things were bad enough for her without this scandal.

“Fine,” said Darcy. “The next time I have a dinner party, I shall invite you. But I don’t know when that will be. I am not entertaining overmuch lately.”

“It had best be within the next two months,” said Mr. Wickham.

Darcy sighed heavily.

“Come now, give me your word,” said Wickham.

“Yes, yes,” muttered Darcy. “Within two months.”

“Excellent,” said Wickham.

“And now you will take your leave of me?”

“Well, since you have not offered me any kind of refreshment or treated me with any kind of courtesy, I could only assume I am not wanted.”

“You are not, in fact,” said Darcy in a flat voice.

Wickham shook his head. “Have a care, Darcy. You do not wish to perturb me, I do not think.”

Darcy folded his arms over his chest and glared at the other man.

Wickham squared his shoulders, giving Darcy a haughty look, and he strolled over to the doors. He opened them with a flourish, and Darcy heard him being sharp with the maid when she wasn't quick enough gathering Wickham's coat and hat.

Finally, Wickham left, and Darcy heard the front door click closed. Sighing heavily, he went to the door of the sitting room. "You may put out the fire in here," he said softly to the maid. "I don't think anyone else will be in the room for the rest of the day."

"Mr. Darcy," said a low voice.

Darcy turned, and there was Mr. Giles in the corner, almost in the darkness. He was still wearing his hat and his coat, which was his way. Mr. Giles was a mysterious sort of man. Possibly, he'd once been a spy for the royal court, though Giles would not confirm or deny this. Mr. Darcy only knew him through his late father, who had been sure to introduce Darcy to him, and to tell him that Mr. Giles's services, though not inexpensive, could prove invaluable. His was a friendship that all Darcy men needed to cultivate, because one never knew when knowing him might be necessary.

"I did not see you there," Darcy said.

"As was my design," said Mr. Giles. "I do have news for you, though, if now is a good time for us to speak."

"Absolutely," said Darcy. He turned to the maid. "About the tea and cake you spoke of—"

"No need for that." Giles took off his hat, smiling at the maid. "I shan't be here long."

"I must insist," said Darcy. "It's the least I can do, after all."

"No, no, it is I who shall insist. It's too late in the day for tea. I don't like to be kept up at night," said Giles. "And I'm not much for sweets."

"All right, then," said Darcy, gesturing for Giles to enter the sitting room.

Giles came inside.

Mr. Darcy shut the doors again.

Giles wandered across the room to the mantle of the fireplace. He ran a finger over the edge of it. "The man you were looking for, the one who was keeping company with Mr. Wickham, is a man called Denny."

"All right," said Darcy, furrowing his brow. "Denny, you say? Am I meant to know who that is?"

"No, it's unlikely you would. He's an officer in a regiment of the militia and he's currently stationed in Meryton."

"Meryton, hmm?" said Darcy. "In Hertfordshire."

"Indeed, sir."

Well, well. Interesting. What a coincidence that Darcy's friend Mr. Bingley had just rented a country house very near to Meryton.

* * *

"Mr. Darcy, it is *such* a surprise," said Miss Caroline Bingley, who was smiling rather too widely at him across the sitting room in her brother's London townhouse.

Oh, yes, Darcy had forgotten about this, had he not? How long had Miss Bingley somewhat fancied him? Since that time he had come home to spend a week with the Bingleys when he and Mr. Bingley were at college, he thought. Miss Bingley was quite young then. He supposed it would have been too much to hope she'd grown out of it.

"I had hoped that Mr. Bingley would be here," said Darcy.

"Oh, Charles is enamored with that wretched place in the country," spoke up Mrs. Hurst, Mr. Bingley's other sister. She was married to Mr. Hurst, of course. Hurst himself was a quiet fellow who seemed to have determined that life was easier if he let his wife steer his course and so acted accordingly. "He's been there since the end of September, and he keeps sending letters to us, begging us to come."

"Well, that was the reason I had called, actually," said Darcy. "I find myself rather in want of some good country air. The country is beautiful this time of the year, is it not?"

"It is," said Caroline Bingley, still smiling too widely.

"Are you off to Pemberley, then?" said Mrs. Hurst.

"No, I had no plans of that," said Darcy.

"Perhaps one of your other country estates?" said Mrs. Hurst.

"No, I..." Darcy cleared his throat. This was dreadful, wasn't it? He was botching this all rather badly. It was only that it was very rude to simply come out and ask for an invitation to Bingley's house, and especially since Bingley himself was not even present. "That is, if Bingley were here, I would have... but he is not here, is he? So, perhaps I should simply—"

"I see your meaning," cut in Miss Bingley, excited. "Why, if you truly wish to go and see Charles's new obsession, then you could be quite of use to us. You could conduct us to Netherfield. That is what

it is called, you see. Netherfield. We'd be quite grateful of that, would we not, Louisa?" She turned on her sister.

Mrs. Hurst furrowed her brow. It had been rather obvious that she and Miss Bingley disdained the entire enterprise.

Miss Bingley tilted her head to one side, moving her eyebrows meaningfully.

Mrs. Hurst gave a slight shake of her head.

"Can't we take our own carriage?" spoke up Mr. Hurst.

"No," said Miss Bingley immediately and firmly. "No, we cannot." She turned back to Mr. Darcy. "Indeed, we are terribly in need of you, sir. You must convey us there, and if you arrive with us, then Charles will not be able to refuse your company. Think, we could spend *weeks* together." She was beaming.

Mr. Darcy swallowed. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"It is all decided, then," said Miss Bingley, clapping her hands together.

"I suppose it is," said Mrs. Hurst, sighing. "We are going to the country." She did not sound pleased.

"We are?" said Mr. Hurst. "Has something happened to the carriage? Why did no one tell me?"

"Oh, Mr. Hurst, please, think nothing of the carriage," said Miss Bingley, only she said it while looking at Mr. Darcy, and then she gave a high, somewhat artificial laugh.

Darcy swallowed again. Perhaps he should have simply stayed in an inn.

* * *

Arriving at Netherfield went almost exactly as Miss Bingley had predicted, and Mr. Bingley was very pleased that Darcy had come. He shook his hand, grinning proudly, and said that Darcy must come and see all of the estate and that he was deeply happy that Darcy had come.

Darcy had missed Bingley. He was good chap, very agreeable, and he could be quite comfortable in the other fellow's company. He and Bingley really ought to spend more time together. Perhaps it was a good thing he'd come.

Of course, he'd left Georgiana back in London, and he didn't really want to be away from her for too long. That was how this entire mess had begun, after all, with his abandoning her to others. He must be as close to her as possible from now on.

It seemed that things would go easily and quickly, however,

when Darcy found out that there was a public ball in Meryton quite soon. Surely the officers of the militia would be there, including this Mr. Denny, and he could conduct his business quite easily.

But when he arrived at the place where the ball was taking place, he realized it wouldn't be quite so easy. The room was small and smoky and packed with people. He had expected there to be a great number of redcoats, but there were not. Instead, there was a shortage of gentlemen and a great many ladies, all obviously having come out to dance with the officers.

Where the officers were, Darcy did not know, but he began his inquiries amongst those that were there and had it confirmed that Mr. Denny was not in attendance. However, the man he spoke to seemed to think that Denny would be on his way shortly. The officers had gotten into some elaborate whist tournament, and a great many of them were waiting to see how it all turned out before coming to the ball.

Hours ticked by, and none of them did, however.

Darcy stayed to the periphery. He was not here to dance. But he feared angering his host and arousing suspicion besides if he did not at least dance with the female members of the household, so he danced with Miss Bingley and with Mrs. Hurst.

He did not want Bingley to know the truth of his mission here. He could not bear anyone know what had befallen his poor sister. It was a scandal, after all, but even more, it was her dignity. He wished to preserve that for her. She did sometimes meet socially with the Bingleys, and it would not do to have them look at her with the knowledge of her past. He would conceal that, for her own sake.

But simply dancing with Bingley's sisters was not enough.

Bingley knew that something was wrong. He himself was having a grand time, dancing with all the women in the room, and his merriment stood in sharp contrast to Darcy's. He stopped by to entreat his friend to dance.

If Darcy danced, he might miss Mr. Denny coming into the ball, not that anyone was arriving late. Not that there was any room for anyone if they decided to do so. But he could not chance missing Mr. Denny. He could not be distracted by one dance after the other. Why, two dances would rob him of an hour. There was simply no time for dancing.

But he could not say this to Bingley, so he racked his brain for

some other excuse. He said the first thing that came to mind, that he could not bear to dance with women who he did not know.

Bingley said this was a stupid excuse, which of course it was, and protested that many of the girls were pretty.

Darcy had not given them much attention. He was rather preoccupied, but he did remember that Bingley had shown special preference to a girl, dancing with her twice, and Darcy decided not to offend his friend by allowing that Bingley's favorite was "the only handsome girl in the room." He settled upon another excuse, that he was not interested in dancing with ugly women. He pronounced them all below his standard. It was another stupid excuse, but he did not care. Bingley would likely believe it of him.

Darcy had been teased, after all, during their time together at school, for being too particular about various things, something that may have been true when he was a boy, used to being catered to in his own household, but had been quite eradicated from him during his schooling. He was no more fastidious now than other men he knew, and he certainly didn't mind dancing with women, whatever their appearance. He supposed there was nothing worse than a frightfully dull conversationalist, but that couldn't be discerned by looking at a woman, could it?

Bingley did indeed latch onto this and cried out that Darcy was just the same as ever, and that he would not be like him. And then he pointed out the sister of his favorite.

Darcy turned to look at the woman, intending to do it cursorily, and to reject her out of hand.

Instead, he quite felt as if his breath was knocked out of him.

Inwardly, he scolded himself. Why claim the women were ugly? Why, the two sisters were both uncommonly lovely, and he could see the resemblance in their mother, who—even though she was far out of her prime—still bore the marks of having once been quite a handsome, tempting woman.

It was the kind of beauty that might make Darcy decide he didn't care as much about conversation after all, and he gulped at that, because he didn't consider himself a shallow man, turned by a pretty face or the curve of a knowing smile, like the one Bingley's favorite's sister was giving him now.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet," said Bingley in a whisper. "You cannot tell me she is not lovely."

"She is..." Mr. Darcy choked, still gazing at her like a man adrift

at sea. "Tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me."

He could swear that Elizabeth Bennet's lips curved into a wider smile, as if she were mocking him.

He coughed, tearing his gaze from her, horrified at his reaction. "No one else is dancing with her either. I am not inclined to give consequence to women slighted by other men. What do you take me for, Bingley?"

Bingley laughed. "You, my friend, are blind, and that is all I have to say for you."

"Yes, well, that is as it may be," said Darcy, who was beginning to feel as if simply looking at Miss Elizabeth Bennet had done something to disrupt the inner workings of his organs. "You are wasting your time with me."

"Clearly," said Bingley and took his leave of him.

Darcy was obliged to go and find someplace to sit down. For the next three-quarters of an hour, he gave little thought to Mr. Denny and instead tried to puzzle out what could possibly be wrong with him that he had such a violent reaction to Miss Elizabeth.

She was pretty, certainly, but her elder sister might be said to be a bit prettier. Something about the set of her nose or her lips. Miss Elizabeth's face must favor her father more than her mother. But he liked the fact that her lips were a little too large and that her nose was too sharp. He... it bespoke intelligence, just as her mocking smile did, and her twinkling eyes, and—

Oh, Lord, a woman could not *look* intelligent.

He was making excuses for behaving like a schoolboy. Well, for *feeling* like a schoolboy. He didn't suppose his behavior had been untoward at all. No, he was quite in control of himself.

He was not even seeking her out with his gaze to see her again, even though he desperately wished to.

All right, perhaps once.

And when he did, she was looking at him again, but talking to another of the women, and she was laughing, and he got the impression *again* that she was mocking him. There was something hard in her eyes this time, almost as if she disliked him rather strongly.

But she didn't know him. She could hardly dislike him.

Damnation.

He was falling apart here. He would not be distracted by a woman, not in this. He had a purpose here, and he refused to be

turned from it.

CHAPTER TWO

Elizabeth Bennet had thought Mr. Darcy rather handsome upon his entry into the Meryton assembly the night before, but her opinion of him had quickly derailed upon observance of his behavior. It was strange how the way that a man behaved could seem to alter his physical appearance.

She knew not what caused it, but it was true.

Perhaps it was only that her dislike of Mr. Darcy caused her to seek out his imperfections. He was tall, yes, with dark features, and an expressive mouth that she had rather liked upon first seeing it. But then, as he twisted his face into such horrid, haughty expressions, she had grown rather to despise his mouth. And besides, weren't his shoulders too broad and his skin a bit too tan? Did he spend all his time outdoors? Did he do manual labor to make his arms so... thick? He looked like a hired hand, not a fine gentleman.

If he looked that way, he likely spent all his time hunting or riding horseback or some other activity that Elizabeth abhorred.

She could not abide horseback riding.

No, he was wretched, and she was not the least bit offended that he found her below his standard of dance partners. She thought it was funny, in fact. Quite funny. Even now, she was laughing about it as she recounted the experience yet again for her sister Jane.

She was in the garden with Jane and her friend, Miss Charlotte Lucas. They had been discussing the ball for some time. They had broken off from a larger gathering of their mothers and sisters besides, all going over every moment of time at the ball, dissecting it. But it was not always possible to speak one's mind in front of everyone. Elizabeth felt easier around her sister and Charlotte.

"I don't know why you keep laughing about it, Lizzy," said her sister, Jane. "I don't think it's the least bit funny. In fact, I think it's

horrid. You are one of the handsomest girls in Hertfordshire, and for this Mr. Darcy to have said otherwise only proves he is a blackguard."

"I agree," said Charlotte. "Everyone speaks of the Bennet girls' beauty."

"Everyone speaks of *Jane's* beauty," said Elizabeth. "Anyway, why should I care about Mr. Darcy? It's not as if I want to marry him or anything wretched like that. His opinion is nothing to me."

"I would marry him," said Charlotte.

"You'd marry anyone," said Elizabeth, but she smiled to soften her pronouncement, letting her friend know it was only gentle teasing.

"It's true, I am desperate," said Charlotte. "I am a spinster past my prime. I would take any offer. But Mr. Darcy?" She winked at Elizabeth. "He is so very tall, isn't he?"

"Yes, but his disposition," said Elizabeth. "Insupportable."

"Well, I rather imagine his estate is large," said Jane, giggling. "One could probably spend days and never have to see him if one wished."

Charlotte burst into giggles as well.

Elizabeth did not laugh.

"Oh, Lizzy, there," said Jane, wrapping her hand around her sister's arm. "It is all right to admit he hurt your feelings. Neither Charlotte nor I will think less of you. In fact, he hurt *my* feelings. What must he think of me? You and I do look alike."

"We don't," said Lizzy. "You favor Mama. And besides, he said that you were the only handsome girl in the room."

"And yet he didn't dance with Jane either," said Charlotte. "He is a snob, a dreadful snob, and we are well shut of him."

"Yes, we must hope he quits the country soon," said Elizabeth. "You must agree that you would not be married to such a man."

Charlotte shrugged.

Jane shrugged.

"Truly, both of you?" Elizabeth put her hands on her hips.

"You are a hopeless romantic, Lizzy," said Charlotte, winking at her. "We all know this about you. You pretend to be so sophisticated and above everything, but deep inside, you want something dramatic and exciting, a thousand ships launched for your face."

"No, I don't want grand gestures," said Elizabeth. "And anyway,

if anyone is Helen, it is Jane. I want... a life different than the one we have. Papa and Mama, the way they are with each other, I..." She sighed. "I don't want that."

"No, of course not," said Jane.

"But it is natural," said Charlotte. "Every couple is much the same. Once two people live together for decades upon decades, they do grow a bit tired of each other. And I rather imagine that even Paris and Helen would have given over to squabbles eventually."

"Besides," said Elizabeth darkly, "Paris really did abduct her against her will, didn't he? No one asked Helen who she *wished* to marry before people started fighting over her."

"I think that depends on the writer," said Jane, eyes twinkling. "In some stories, I think she is quite willing."

"Yes, true," said Elizabeth. "But, at any rate, I am not speaking of squabbles, Charlotte. I'm speaking of deep respect and love, a foundation between two people to create a household together and to raise their children together. Something stable and happy and good. That is what I want. I cannot and I will not marry a man with whom I don't feel I can have that. Because, otherwise, life is misery."

"Life as a spinster is miserable," countered Charlotte.

"If it must be misery either way, then better without a horrid husband," said Elizabeth.

"Even a horrid husband can give a woman children she cherishes," said Jane. "And there is something to be said for having one's own household, not living under the thumb of others."

"I know all these arguments," said Elizabeth, pointing at them both. "And still I am firm. I will not marry unless I believe I could love a man. And I don't mean a brief and silly infatuation either. I mean, a real and true love, one that will weather the tests of time."

* * *

Elizabeth would have been happy not to see Mr. Darcy ever again. Unfortunately, it seemed that he was everywhere thereafter. He appeared at a dinner at the Lucases, though he seemed greatly preoccupied, looking about at all times, refusing to let his gaze settle upon her, as if simply looking at her offended him.

And then Elizabeth's wicked mother schemed to have Jane become ill and be trapped at Netherfield with Mr. Bingley. It was a poor scheme indeed, for Elizabeth did not feel that Jane was in any kind of temper to be wooed by a man while she was suffering from

a cold and stuck abed.

Even if Mr. Bingley would be seeing to Jane's comforts, Jane could not truly relax as she would with a family member. So, Elizabeth traveled to stay with them, even though it meant being stuck under the same roof with Mr. Darcy.

He did not improve upon further acquaintance. He was an arrogant, exacting man who had ridiculous opinions about women and their accomplishments and all manner of other matters. He also seemed to endeavor to never look at her during this time either, although more than once she caught him staring at her, and that mouth of his was slack-jawed. He was *gaping* at her. There was a sharp look in his eyes, and for one moment she almost thought it was desire, but no.

He must be horrified by her appearance. So horrified he could not close his mouth when he looked at her.

Elizabeth could not have been happier when she and Jane could finally leave Netherfield and go home. There, she hoped things would return to normal. She would cease to think of Mr. Darcy, and by and by, he would leave and go away. He could not stay here in the country forever, after all, not when he seemed to have such disdain for everything he encountered.

But before anything could return to any semblance of normalcy, Mr. William Collins arrived to visit. He was her father's heir, a distant cousin who was the next in line to inherit Longbourn, the family home. This was because Elizabeth did not have any brothers.

She could not bear Mr. Collins, who was the sort of ignorant man who refuses to believe he is ignorant, who prizes his weaknesses as strengths and refuses to change them. Everyone who met him thought him ridiculous. He was the silliest man she thought she had ever met.

And he seemed to follow her everywhere.

Why, she could not even walk to Meryton with her sisters without Mr. Collins tagging along with them and complimenting her on the most odd things. Who ever told someone that their elbows were well-formed, after all? Why was he even looking at her elbows?

Perhaps it was her own fault for having pushed up the sleeves of her morning dress earlier, but at the time when he had made the comment, they were outside, and she was wearing a pelisse and gloves besides. Was he recalling the sight of her elbows from some

earlier time? Why did that make her skin crawl, as if the man had somehow violated her?

Her sisters were all looking forward to a ball that was being thrown at Netherfield, but Elizabeth was dreading it. She did have some excitement for her sister, Jane, who would be happy to be able to see Mr. Bingley, of course. Elizabeth did hope for a good match between them. Jane seemed to enjoy Mr. Bingley's company, and the man seemed capable of making her happy.

But for herself, the evening sounded dreadful. She was sure she'd be hounded by Mr. Collins the entire time, and Mr. Darcy had not left the country, so he would be there as well, possibly gazing at her from across the room and judging her.

She considered the possibility of simply inventing a convenient headache and staying home that night, but she decided that she must witness Jane's happiness, that she could not allow her own woes to rob that joy from her.

So, she did go, and it was as she had suspected. Mr. Collins demanded her first two dances and declared that he would stay close to her all evening. It was all too much. Elizabeth had known subconsciously for some time now what Mr. Collins's intentions towards her must be. It only made sense, after all, for him to wish to marry one of the Bennet sisters to keep the estate in the family. It was a very tidy sort of thing. But Elizabeth had not admitted it to herself, because it was too horrific a thing to contemplate.

Now, stuck at this ball, Mr. Collins practically her shadow, his inane conversation making it impossible to watch Jane and Bingley talk together across the room, she knew that she had to face it.

He is going to ask for my hand, she thought.

Her reaction was immediate and intense. She felt as though she couldn't breathe.

Mr. Collins was in the middle of telling her something about his patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who seemed to be able to advise him most excellently in all things, who he seemed to fairly worship. He was oblivious to her distress.

She tugged at the bodice to her gown, pulling it down, and she realized she was likely exposing herself. She sucked in a noisy, rattling breath and then blurted out to Mr. Collins that she was afraid that she needed to go, that she was feeling suddenly ill, and that he must not follow her.

She fairly ran from the ballroom, no heed to where she went,

turning into a darkened room on one of the wings on the first floor. In the light from the hallway, she could make out shadowy shapes that marked it a bedroom. She also spied a lamp sitting on a writing table against the wall. She lit it, gazing into it, trying to steady her breathing.

He is going to ask for my hand, she thought again.

And it was violent, like an iron band closing around her chest.

She must loosen her stays! Now, this instant. She was going to choke to death. They were too tight.

She wriggled out of the sleeves of her evening gown, pushing the fabric down. Her stays were laced in the front, and she fumbled at the leather straps, untying them. She tugged and yanked and—

Ah! Relief.

She sagged against the wall, panting.

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. Darcy could not fathom how it had been so difficult to gain an audience with Mr. Denny, but it had been. Weeks upon weeks had passed, letters sent and lost, dates made and then broken, and now, he was to meet with the man here at Netherfield. He had just now spoken to him, in the ballroom, and told him to meet him here in the hallway.

But now, Mr. Darcy was in the hallway, and Mr. Denny was nowhere to be found.

What could be keeping the man? Darcy clenched his hands into fists. He strongly suspected that Denny was somewhat aligned with Wickham himself, perhaps even communicating with him in London. Wickham could be instructing Denny to lead Darcy on a merry chase here, and perhaps Mr. Denny would never speak to Darcy at all.

The officer had seemed amiable enough on the occasions that they had spoken, and he had agreed that he would speak in private with Mr. Darcy, who wished the privacy for the sake of discretion. He could not have everyone knowing the truth of the matter, after all.

Darcy turned in a circle, fuming, and he saw a light in a room not too far away.

Had the officer gone into that room to wait for him? Darcy had been quite clear that they ought to meet in the hallway, but he had intended for them to go somewhere together where they could be behind closed doors, and the officer must have sensed that. Darcy started for the room.

The door was half-open, and he reached out and pushed it the rest of the way open.

A high-pitched cry came from within.

Darcy registered the sight of Miss Elizabeth Bennet, her dress half

off, uttering a scream.

He backed away, eyes on the floor. "I am... that is... excuse me." The words tripped over themselves on the way out of his mouth. Lord, he'd seen too much of her. Her skin, her shoulders, her—

What was she doing in there? Was someone with her?

He felt an irrational burst of jealousy, and he lifted his gaze to take her in.

She had thrust one of her arms back into the sleeve of her dress, but her other arm was stuck as she endeavored to get it back through. She was alone. There was no one in the room.

"I... you must think me..." She yanked her stuck arm out of her dress, gesturing at him. "Well, I know what you think of me, so this will only further cement your bad opinion of me, but truly, I don't *care* what you think. Not a jot." Her skin flushed, and the flush traveled over her chest to the swell of her bosom, half of which was exposed and which he shouldn't be looking at, and her voice was angry, affected. She was shaking, whether in embarrassment or rage or both, he couldn't be sure.

"Truly, I do not..." His face was hot too. He cleared his throat, and forced his gaze down to study his shoes. "I have made a mistake. I shall take my leave of you."

"Good," she said.

He backed into the hallway, looking sidelong for any sign of Denny, who was not there, of course.

From within the room came the sound of Miss Elizabeth straining, making frustrated noises.

He coughed. "Do you, er... can I assist you in any way?"

"No."

"I could... perhaps if I unbuttoned some of the buttons on the back of your dress?" Why was he offering that? *Stop speaking, Fitz*, he railed at himself. *You can't offer to help a woman unbutton her dress. Are you mad?*

"That would hardly be proper," she said.

"You could put your back to me. I'm sure I wouldn't see anything more that I haven't..." Damnation, these words that were coming out of his mouth? What was wrong with him? That woman was a witch. A sorceress. She was unmaking him at this very moment. He raised his gaze to her.

She was still shaking. She pressed her lips together in a very firm line. Then deliberately, she turned her back on him.

He licked his lips. When he moved, he felt unsteady. He seemed to lurch over the floor to her, and his hands came up jerkily. He fumbled at the small buttons, nearly unable to work them. His fingers brushed the skin of her back. It was incredibly soft, like warm silk.

She sucked in an audible breath.

He did too. He shut his eyes and steadied himself. Then, pulling himself together, he undid the buttons quickly and in a businesslike manner. "There," he murmured.

Contorting herself, she tucked her arm back into the dress and through the sleeve. She tugged her dress up over her shoulder, and then reached into the front of her bodice to arrange her bosom above the gathered empire waist of the dress.

His jaw worked. He swallowed.

And before he could button her back up, the air was split with a ghastly shriek.

CHAPTER FOUR

Darcy turned in the direction of the noise, only to see Mrs. Bennet in the doorway, both of her hands on either of her cheeks, her mouth open wide. She was still shrieking.

Elizabeth turned too, and she cringed. “Mama,” she breathed.

Darcy seized the back of Elizabeth’s dress and forcefully buttoned the buttons. That done, he stalked over to Mrs. Bennet and took her by the shoulders and shook her. “Stop that, madam.”

“What. Is. Happening?” said Mrs. Bennet in a wavering voice.

Elizabeth went to her mother, trying to smile at her. “Listen, I had one of my attacks, where I felt as though I couldn’t breathe, and my stays were tight, and I needed to loosen—”

“All this time,” said Mrs. Bennet, her lower lip trembling, “I was out in the ballroom wondering, ‘Why is poor Mr. Collins alone? Why isn’t Lizzy with him?’ And you’ve been here, with Mr. Darcy, of all people. But you went on for days about how much you despise him.”

Despise? Darcy turned to her. “What reason have I ever given you to despise me?”

“All this time, Mama?” said Elizabeth, laughing. “Don’t be silly. I can’t have been gone longer than ten minutes. You are being quite ridiculous.”

“I don’t think I’ve said anything to you to merit such loathing,” said Darcy, shaking his head. It bothered him more than he could say that she hated him, especially since he’d brushed his fingers against her warm skin.

“I have often wondered if you were a changeling child,” said Mrs. Bennet in a very loud voice that was like a wail. “Surely no daughter of mine could behave in such a manner. Do you not realize what will become of us if you spurn Mr. Collins? How could you, Lizzy? How *could* you? And now, *this*. Half undressed with a

man in a room?"

"Mama," said Elizabeth. "Nothing happened."

"Nothing at all," said Darcy. "Why, I still don't understand why she was unable to get into her dress, but there was certainly nothing untoward, and I only assisted in an attempt to be gentlemanly." That was the reason he'd done it, of course. He hadn't *meant* to brush his fingers against her skin. He couldn't have *meant* it.

"Everyone will know!" cried Mrs. Bennet.

"Not if you shut your mouth," snapped Elizabeth.

But it was too late, because Mrs. Bennet's loud voice had brought a crowd, and they were all filtering out of the ballroom, led by Mr. Bingley, who was all astonishment.

Mr. Darcy groaned.

Mr. Denny was right behind Mr. Bingley, looking about as if searching for someone.

"If you'll both excuse me," said Mr. Darcy to Elizabeth and Mrs. Bennet. He gave them a bow. "Good evening." He lifted his head and walked away, going right past Bingley's shocked face to intercept Denny.

"Mr. Darcy!" said Mr. Denny, as if they had met by chance on the street.

"Mr. Denny," said Mr. Darcy. "With me?"

"All right," said Denny, shrugging.

In the distance, Mrs. Bennet had begun to wail again. "Oh, my Lizzy, my own Lizzy, you are the most wretched, wretched girl. I don't know what to make of you, what have you done?"

Mr. Darcy pushed Mr. Denny into the library, shutting the door on the sound of the woman.

"You have ruined us all. Do you even feel the slightest bit—"

* * *

"Sorry for what you've done?" said Mrs. Bennet from across the carriage.

Elizabeth sat wedged between Jane and her sister Kitty. It was early, and they were heading home. Her father had packed them up immediately once he saw he could not still his wife's tongue.

Her father was currently rubbing his temples as if he had a headache.

"Poor Mr. Collins, can you imagine how he must be feeling?" said Mrs. Bennet.

"Speaking of Mr. Collins," said her father in a wry voice, "has anyone any idea how he is to get home?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Bennet, eyes widening. "I had not thought of that."

"Neither had I," said Mr. Bennet, sighing.

"You were to marry Mr. Collins," said Mrs. Bennet. "You realize this, don't you, Lizzy?"

"Lizzy does not have to marry anyone she does not wish to marry," said Mr. Bennet.

"What?" said Mrs. Bennet. "Of course she does. We are her parents. Who else should decide such a thing for a young girl, tell me?"

"Mrs. Bennet, please," said her husband. "I must know what happened. On that, I am entirely confused. Lizzy, please, explain."

Elizabeth looked at her father's face, feeling terrified. Her father had defended her, yes, but she knew him well enough to know when he was agitated, and he was not happy with her right now. To think she had disappointed her dear Papa, it was enough to break her heart.

Her lower lip started to tremble, so she bit down on it. Hard.

"Lizzy," prompted her father. "Explain."

"I... oh, it's dreadful," said Elizabeth, fighting to keep the hitch out of her voice. "I had an episode, you know, where I felt as if I couldn't breathe, as though everything was closing in on me, and my stays, they were so tight, and it was unbearable, so..."

"Oh, I thought you had outgrown those fits," said her father, frowning his brow. "It has not happened since you were thirteen."

Elizabeth shrugged. "I had to loosen them, I just *did*, and I went away from everyone, but then—oh, I don't *know*—Mr. Darcy was there, and I couldn't get my dress back on and then Mama, she was so *loud*, and then..." She let out a shuddering breath, and she knew she could not continue speaking or she would begin sobbing. She was *not* going to cry. She concentrated on her breathing instead, and she laced and unlaced her fingers, refusing to meet anyone's gaze.

"Lord!" said Mrs. Bennet. "So, he did not touch you?"

"No," said Elizabeth. "Well... sort of. He was doing the buttons and his fingers... grazed me." She thought of that, how it was strange that a small touch like that should have traveled through her in a such a way. She had felt it everywhere, a ripple of

something darkly pleasant. “But he kept his gaze downcast, and I think he was rather embarrassed as well, and I shouldn’t have let him do it, but I didn’t know how I would get back in the dress otherwise, so I just... I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry.”

“She’s ruined,” said Mrs. Bennet in a low, sad voice. “We all are. And for nothing. And he simply walked off.”

“Now, now, Fanny,” said her father. “I will go and call on him in the morning, and he will make it clear that nothing happened, and it will become a bit of a joke, but—”

“Mr. Bennet!” Mrs. Bennet’s voice was shrill. “No one will accept any explanation for why Lizzy was undressing in the midst of a ball.”

“Well, no one saw that, did they?” said Mr. Bennet. “When everyone got there, she was clothed, and it was just your screaming. If you had but kept your mouth shut, then—”

“Don’t you scold me,” huffed Mrs. Bennet. “After I had witnessed such a thing, the fright it gave me was severe. I could hardly be expected not to react.”

“We shall set it aright,” said Mr. Bennet more to himself than any of them. “We shall find a way. And then, I shall find Mr. Collins, and I shall convince him... although how shall I do that, when everything I have will one day be his? What could I possibly offer him as an inducement—”

“I won’t marry him!” Elizabeth burst out.

Everyone in her family turned on her in disbelief.

She cowered, but the words ripped out of her anyway. “I can *never* marry Mr. Collins.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Yes, the marquess, the son of the Duke of Bellingshire. I believe it was his card game,” said Mr. Denny. “But there were five others besides, all sons of earls and dukes and perhaps a baron, I believe.”

Mr. Darcy rubbed his chin. “And you’re sure. Mr. Wickham got this information from that card game.”

“He told me that he had gotten word of something rather enormous, and that he was going to go to Ramsgate, where he had been told your sister was staying, and that he was going to find some way to use the information. I don’t know what he intended exactly. Probably to extort money from her directly, I suppose. Or perhaps simply to confirm with her before he approached you. I have to say, sir, I am sorry about it all. I’m not that sort of man myself. I would never—”

“It’s fine, Mr. Denny. Your information is what I need. I can also offer you something for your discretion. If you could forget what you know about my sister—”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be spreading that around,” said Mr. Denny. “It’s not my way. I don’t get any joy from that sort of thing, and I don’t gossip like a woman.”

“I appreciate it,” said Mr. Darcy. “Even still, for the information you’ve given me, I feel obligated to reward you.” He reached into the pocket of his jacket and drew out a pouch with some gold in it.

“No, no,” said Mr. Denny, shaking his head. “I really couldn’t.”

“I insist,” said Darcy, thrusting it into his hands. He sighed. “Thank you again.”

Denny shifted the pouch back and forth between his palms. Then he shoved it into his own pocket and nodded. “Glad to be of assistance, sir.”

“You leave the room first,” said Darcy. “It wouldn’t do for us to be seen together.”

"Everyone saw us together," said Denny, squinting at him. "You grabbed me and pulled me away."

Darcy grimaced. "Well, be that as it may, I would appreciate it if we could leave separately."

Denny shrugged. "As you wish, sir."

Darcy watched the other man leave and then he waited a bit, turning this new information over in his mind. He could easily find the names of the boys who were often in the society of Bellingshire's son. Bellingshire, in fact, had a country estate that butted up against Pemberley. Darcy had seen the young marquess nearly every summer when he was a boy.

It could be one of them, he supposed. It could be the marquess. He would have to puzzle it all out.

He ought to go back to the damnable ball now, though, before people started wondering where he was. After the business with Miss Elizabeth, he couldn't say what the whispers might be, but he feared the worst.

When he left the library, however, he discovered that the ball seemed to have broken up. There was no more music, and there were only a few families left, talking in clumps outside as they waited for their carriages.

Bingley was at his side at once, looking incensed. "Where did you go? Lord, Darcy."

Darcy winced. "My apologies. Is this my doing? Everyone leaving so early?"

"Well, I don't know," said Bingley. "Perhaps it's Mrs. Bennet's doing, but you did seem to put her into a right state. What happened, and why did you disappear?"

"I had business..." Darcy sighed.

"Come with me. Let's go to my study and have some brandy. You can tell me everything."

"It's a mistake," said Darcy. "Mrs. Bennet thought she saw something, but she didn't see anything."

"Brandy," said Bingley again. "I need some if I'm going to hear this." He stalked off, not waiting to see if Darcy was keeping up.

* * *

Later, settled in the study, each clutching a glass of strong drink and staring into a roaring fire, Darcy explained what had happened in detail as Bingley leaned close, taking in every word.

"So, you see," Darcy finished, "nothing happened. I don't know

why she was undressing there, but she said something about her stays being too tight, and I think she was simply uncomfortable. I really have no notion. Likely, I should have run the other way.”

“Yes, I think you should have,” said Bingley, slowly shaking his head. “Whatever possessed you to act as her lady’s maid, Darcy? What were you thinking?”

“I... wasn’t,” Darcy muttered into his glass. “She was half-undressed, you know. It was hardly as if blood was rushing toward my brain.”

Bingley spit brandy everywhere. “*Darcy!*” he protested, laughing. Darcy rubbed his forehead ruefully.

Bingley used his handkerchief to mop at the brandy he’d spit onto his cravat.

“Everyone will be talking about this, won’t they? How long do you suppose before the news gets to London?”

“Oh, not long, I shouldn’t wonder.”

Darcy sighed. “I don’t understand, I must say. What is the situation of the family? You are so interested in the eldest sister. Who are they? The father is a gentleman?”

“Yes, with a small estate,” said Bingley. “They are not well-to-do, but they are respectable enough. From what I gather, the estate is entailed on that Mr. Collins.”

“Oh.” Darcy groaned. “Did you know he spoke to me without an introduction? Just thrust himself into my path. I might have overlooked it if he hadn’t started gushing about my dreadful aunt. Lord, he worships Lady Catherine. He is the devil incarnate.”

Bingley laughed again. “He is quite something to take, I will agree. Anyway, I have the impression he has settled upon Miss Elizabeth as his favorite, and he is determined to marry her.”

“Oh,” said Mr. Darcy, his lip curling at the thought of that. That wretch brushing his hands against her silky skin. He didn’t like that. Not at all.

“After the father dies, they’ll be reliant on Collins, of course,” said Bingley. “It quite makes sense for him to marry one of the daughters. I’m only glad he inexplicably skipped over the eldest, leaving her to me.”

Darcy raised his eyebrows. “You are considering marrying her? Truly?”

“I have never felt this way about a woman before,” said Bingley. “But Darcy, you have likely ruined it all.”

“What? Ruined?” He furrowed his brow. “I suppose the rumors could be damaging to Miss Elizabeth’s reputation.”

“And her whole family along with her,” said Bingley. “People think you were... well, not buttoning her dress. They think that you were—”

“Yes, I understand what they think,” said Darcy. “But I wasn’t. We weren’t. It was nothing at all like that. I shall simply tell everyone that it was not that way, and—”

“Oh, yes, you’ll say she removed her dress herself? That you had nothing to do with that?”

“She didn’t *remove* her dress, it was just down about her waist.”

“Yes, that’s entirely better.”

“I didn’t undress her.”

“No one will believe that.”

Darcy groaned.

“Look, if none of the girls can make a good marriage, they shall be destroyed. Never mind the fact that they’ll be cut from society, they won’t have enough money to live, Darcy. The estate is *entailed*.”

“You said you were going to marry the eldest,” said Darcy, gulping at his brandy.

“Well, I can’t very well do that if her sister is a flaming hussy.”

“She’s *not*.”

“You’ll have to marry her,” said Bingley.

“I couldn’t possibly—” But then Darcy broke off, because he thought he might rather want to marry Miss Elizabeth Bennet more than anything in the world. He might want to touch her skin again. He might want to unbutton every single one of her buttons and peel her dress— He sat up straight, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. Best not to think of such things in the company of others. He cleared his throat.

“I know she’s not well connected,” said Bingley. “I know her mother especially is rather a disaster, but you know, I also come only from trade and you associate with me, so I don’t really see why you would object.”

“Yes,” said Darcy softly. “Marry her. Hmm.”

“I also know you’re sort of betrothed to your cousin—”

“I’m not,” said Darcy. “I have never given my word on that. It is entirely in my aunt’s head. I would never marry Anne. Never. And I am a man of means, and I have certain freedoms, and if I wish, I

can marry anyone I want.”

“Exactly,” said Mr. Bingley.

Darcy blinked. “All right, well, I suppose I should go in the morning to speak to her father, sort all this out.”

“You’ll do it?” said Bingley. “Truly? I had thought... you said she was not handsome.”

“Well, I hadn’t got a good look at her then,” said Darcy, finishing the rest of his brandy.

Bingley snorted.

“I didn’t mean that way,” said Darcy, giving him a reproachful look. It was better to marry her, anyhow. He couldn’t court scandal, not with everything else he had to deal with. Of course, he probably shouldn’t be getting married. It would be a devil of a distracting thing, and he was trying to find out what had happened to Georgiana.

He had a feeling Elizabeth could be very distracting.

But, well, there was nothing for it, and maybe it would be good for him to have some kind of release, and he... well, he had gone rather mad about this woman. She was...

He had to have her.

That was that.

CHAPTER SIX

Breakfast was scarcely over before there was word that Mr. Darcy had come to Longbourn to call. Elizabeth was stunned. It was not even late enough for her father to have gone to call on Mr. Darcy to attempt to smooth this over.

Not that Elizabeth could see any way to smooth it over.

She wasn't going to marry Mr. Collins. She had made herself very clear on that point. And she didn't truly think that Mr. Darcy was going to be able to convince everyone that nothing had happened between them.

Surely, some people would believe it as truth, but people would also gossip, and it all looked bad. There was truly no excuse for being half-dressed or for allowing Mr. Darcy to assist her with her buttons or for him to brush his knuckles against her back—

Oh, Lord.

She'd dreamed about it last night, awoken with her entire body tight and tense, all of her skin alight in goosebumps. She'd had a horrid time getting back to sleep afterward.

But none of that mattered, because everyone was going to think she had done something very improper with Mr. Darcy, and she would never have a husband, not of any kind, let alone one she could respect and love as she had always wanted.

Not only that, her entire family was ruined, including Jane.

Poor, sweet Jane who was so in love with Mr. Bingley.

Oh.

Elizabeth tried to convince herself to marry Mr. Collins if only for Jane's sake, but she could not quite do it. Mr. Collins was too dreadful. And, at any rate, he had apparently stayed the night at the Lucases and might never renew his suit to her in any case.

Thoughts like these had been flitting through Elizabeth's mind all night, and it seemed that her chattering mind would never stop. She

could hardly bear the thoughts, and she wished with all her might that it might stop, but she had little control over it, she found. It was horrid.

Everything was horrid.

And now, Mr. Darcy was here, and why could he be here?

He asked to speak to her father, and the two retired to Mr. Bennet's study, where they were gone for nearly a half an hour, during which time Elizabeth could not do anything but sit stricken in the sitting room and gaze out the window, her mind churning.

Her sisters spoke to each other, and, indeed, even to her, but Elizabeth could not mark them, nor could she answer them. She was too contained within herself with the anxiety of the moment.

Why had Mr. Darcy come?

What was he saying to her father?

He must be sensible to the fact that his participation in the incident the previous night meant he was part of this drama. He must understand the danger to Elizabeth's reputation. If he had gone to her father, was it so that he could find some means of easing the problem? Or was it that he was there to protest his innocence and to wash his hands of the entire matter?

She had a wild thought, so silly she almost burst out laughing, that perhaps he had come to ask her father for permission to ask for her hand in marriage, but of course Mr. Darcy would not marry a woman whose appearance was so displeasing as to warrant his refusal to even dance with her, let alone make her his wife.

No, that was quite impossible.

Mrs. Hill, their servant, came after the half hour had passed and requested for Elizabeth to come to her father's study as well.

Elizabeth got to her feet, ready to leave, but she was prevented from going anywhere by her mother, who was peppering Hill with questions about what was being discussed in the study and why Elizabeth was being summoned. But Hill was as insensible to it all as the rest of them and she had no answers to give.

Finally, after much protestations of frustration, her mother allowed her to go, but she called after Elizabeth admonishments to make sure she was on her best behavior and not to make the situation even worse.

In the study, her father and Mr. Darcy both stood when she entered. Her father was sitting behind his desk, which was rather untidy. There were piles of ledgers on one corner and haphazard

piles of books on another. There was only a narrow view between the piles for someone sitting on the opposite side of the desk to see the man sitting behind it. Mr. Darcy must have been peering around the book piles for all this time as they spoke.

Elizabeth felt hotly embarrassed by her father's untidy study. She knew that Mr. Darcy was quick to give condemnation, and she could only imagine what he might tell to Mr. Bingley, or how he and Miss Bingley might laugh together as he described it.

"Lizzy," said her father, "here you are, at last." He gave her a reassuring smile.

Elizabeth clasped her hands together in front of her, unsure of what to do or say. "Good morning," she finally said, and she tried to smile at Mr. Darcy in an amiable way, but her lips would not cooperate, and she feared that she only twisted her expression into something very like a grimace.

"Good morning," said Mr. Darcy gravely. He glanced at her and then quickly looked away, as he usually did, as if he could not bear looking at her.

"Listen, my darling," said her father, "you are my daughter, and I dote upon you. I would have nothing in the world but your happiness, as you well know. But I must say, Lizzy, that we are in a bit of a bind, all of us, and that things would go far easier for us if you would accept Mr. Darcy."

Accept Mr. Darcy? Accept what from him? She furrowed her brow, utterly confused.

Her father cleared his throat. "Anyway, I should only caution you not to be hasty, to advise that you think through it all thoroughly before you respond, perhaps?" He gave her a pointed look.

What was he talking about?

"Very well, then," said her father. "I shall leave the two of you to it, then." He came out from behind the desk, absently feeling in his pocket for something, and then realizing it was his handkerchief, which was lying on his desk. He went back to pick it up, giving them both a smile and a nod, and then he went out, shutting the door behind him.

Elizabeth took a step backward. She had just been left alone with Mr. Darcy, which could only mean—

"Miss Bennet," said Mr. Darcy. "First, I must apologize for taking my leave of you in the midst of everything last night. I had urgent business, which could not wait. In fact, it was on the pursuit of that

business that I stumbled upon you last night in the first place. Perhaps if I had not disappeared so quickly, we might have contained this, but I have to say I am not entirely displeased about how things have turned out.”

Her lips parted. What was he saying? What was happening?

Mr. Darcy took a breath. “All right, well, I’m not sure how to begin. I know that we hardly know each other, and that I have endeavored to stay as clear as I could from all society here, owing again to this business that I have been speaking of. I know, also, that there is a great disparity between our stations, and that you would not be the first choice of many of my family and close friends, but the truth is that I actually most ardently admire you, and I believe that all these obstacles are not insurmountable, and that our marriage will be quite agreeable to us both.”

“Our marriage, sir?” She lifted her chin. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Naturally,” said Mr. Darcy. “It rather solves all of your problems, does it not? There can be no concern over your reputation if we come together and all is done properly, and there can be no worry on the front of Mr. Collins and his rejection of the family. Further, I shall be in a position to assist your sisters and mother in the dreadful event of your father’s death, I am quite sure. It would be nothing to me to do so. So, I can’t think there would be any reason it would not be agreeable to you.”

“No, sir?”

“No,” he said. He squinted at her. “You do find it agreeable?”

“That is the first question you’ve asked me,” she said, and there was a bit of heat in her voice. She wasn’t sure where the anger was coming from. Maybe it was because she could not bear any longer to feel the anxiety she’d been feeling, the churning in her gut and her thoughts, and anger was something of a comfort now. Maybe it was because Mr. Darcy was acting so officious, assuming he understood everything.

“Is it?” He appeared to ponder this. “I don’t think so. I believe I’ve asked for your hand.”

“In fact, you have not,” she said. “You have gone on in a rather circumspect manner, speaking of what is to happen, but you have not, in truth, put the question to me.”

“Oh,” he said, blinking. “Well, what do you say?”

“To what?”

"To marrying me." He shook his head at her. "Come now, Miss Bennet, we both know you are not daft. You showed remarkable sparks of wit when I spoke to you in Netherfield. Indeed, from the moment I saw you, I could see your intelligence written on your countenance."

"My intelligence is what you saw?"

"Yes, and I was... you are..." He looked up at her, and the words seemed to die in his throat. He gazed at her, mouth open in that way of his, and then he swallowed. He directed the next to the pile of books on her father's desk. "So very, very lovely. I'm sorry, I seem to be at a loss for words. Your brilliance has quite robbed me of speech."

"*What?*" She clenched her hands into fists. How *dare* he say that to her? How *dare* he?

"I... do you want me to repeat it?" He was confused.

"That is a *lie*, and we both know it, sir. You do not need to make up lies. In fact, there is no reason at all for you to be complimentary to me. You could be quite honest about your opinion of me, and it would not weaken your suit. All that you have said thus far is true. It would be an advantageous match for one such as me."

"I have not lied to you. What are you talking about?"

"Why are you doing this? What could possibly induce you to wish to be married to me?"

"Well, I..." He cleared his throat. "You don't strike me as one of those women who says less than complimentary things about herself to bait others into saying the opposite, but I admit I do not know you well. If you wish me to extol your virtues and wax poetic, however, I am not prepared for such a thing."

"I am asking honestly," she said. "Why?"

"I..." He looked up at her again, and their gazes locked, and she thought again that he spent too much time outdoors, but that his somewhat tanned skin was possibly rather nice, and that he was beginning to appear as handsome as he had the first time she saw him, in spite of all she knew about his character, and she could not bear that. She had the strong urge to go to him and to start beating her hands against his chest, not that she thought it would make any difference, because he was rather broad and solid. His jaw worked. His voice came out low and scratchy. "I must have you, Miss Bennet. Say yes."

The words did things to her, strange awful things, physical

sensations, like the way it had felt when he'd brushed her skin, and now her body felt flushed and aware and too sensitive, as if she could feel every strand of the fabric in her clothes against her skin.

"No," she said.

"What?"

"No," she said again. "No, no, no, I can't." She picked up her skirts and barreled into the door, pushing it open and tumbling into the hallway.

Her father was there, looking concerned. "Lizzy," he said, "I know you had said that you did not like him, but certainly, given the circumstances—"

"Out of my way, Papa," she said fiercely, rushing past him. She kept going through the hallways of the house and out the front door. She charged into the garden and then out into the nearby fields. She didn't know where she was going or what she was doing. She only knew that she had to keep running.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Elizabeth, still running, burst out onto the road and she saw Charlotte Lucas wandering alone, her bonnet tangled in her hands, her hair still in two braids that looked slept on. She seemed distraught.

“Charlotte?” Lizzy hurried toward her friend.

“Oh, Lizzy, it’s you,” said Charlotte. “I was coming to see you. I’ve been up all night.”

Elizabeth met her friend on the road, and she clasped both of the other woman’s hands in her own. “What is wrong?”

“It’s Mr. Collins. He proposed to me.”

“Oh, dear,” said Lizzy. “I’m so dreadfully sorry, Charlotte. I know your father will not be pleased to hear you have refused him—”

“Oh, I haven’t.” Charlotte gave her a pained look. “I mean, I haven’t accepted him either, but I didn’t dismiss it out of hand. But it’s clear you wish me to, and so I shall. I shall go back to him even now and tell him that he must renew his suit to you.”

“No, *I* don’t wish to marry him! I could never marry a man like that.”

“Truly?” Charlotte raised her eyebrows. “What are you doing out here, alone on the road? I am here because I have walked too far when I was supposed to be out thinking. I had to speak to you. But are you all right?”

Elizabeth sank a hand into her hair. “Oh, it’s dreadful. Mr. Darcy has asked me to marry him.”

“Mr. Darcy has?” Charlotte’s face lit up. “But Lizzy, that’s wonderful. All is saved. How gallant of him. He does not have to do it, but he has restored your honor and your family’s besides.”

“I refused him.”

“What?”

“He said that I was lovely, that from the first he’d laid eyes on

me, he could see that I was intelligent and that my brilliance robbed him of speech.”

“These are bad things?”

“They are lies. We know that he does not find me attractive in the least. Why would he lie?”

“I don’t know, but I think it’s customary to say things about a woman’s beauty when you ask for her hand.”

“No, it wasn’t like that. It wasn’t as if he’d memorized a speech or something, these things burst out of him, as if he was... as if... oh, I don’t know, but I hate that man. He is wretched. Everything about him is horrible.”

“Yes, he has his faults, but what man doesn’t?” said Charlotte. She reached out and touched Elizabeth gently on the shoulder. “If you refuse him, you will never have another offer of marriage. You will be ruined.”

“By the gossip, yes, perhaps,” said Elizabeth. “But since nothing happened at all, and no one really saw anything—”

“Elizabeth, come now, you know that there is danger. Yes, it could work out all right, but it may not.”

Elizabeth sighed. “And if it does not, it is not only I who suffer.” Jane. Sweet, sweet Jane, her sister and closest confidante. She swallowed. Elizabeth could not marry Mr. Collins, not even for Jane, but Mr. Darcy was... well, there were a great many things to recommend Mr. Darcy, were there not? And perhaps they had all been right those weeks ago, when they had spoken about being able to stay on opposite sides of his great estate. Being married to him, it might not be so terrible.

But her dream had always been to have a marriage that didn’t resemble her parents’ marriage. She had wanted a strong foundation, a happy home, and love and respect. All of that would be gone.

But Charlotte was right. She would likely never get that, and if she did not agree to Mr. Darcy’s proposal, it would be selfish. She had to think of her family. Her shoulders sagged. “I don’t know what to do. I told him no. What if he won’t...? What if that was my only chance?”

“You must go after him straightaway,” said Charlotte. “And Lizzy, if you are not going to marry Mr. Collins...”

“You would say yes to that man?”

Charlotte shrugged. “I am not like you, Lizzy. I don’t need the

things you need. I think I could be happy with him. It is long past time I left my parents' house. Give me your blessing?"

"Of course, if that is what you wish," said Elizabeth.

"Thank you," said Charlotte. Impulsively, she reached out and took Elizabeth's hand. She squeezed it. "Now, go. After him. Find him."

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes, I shall. And thank you, Charlotte. Thank you for showing me another way to look at it."

* * *

Darcy muttered soothing words to his horse, rubbing its flank softly. He thought that the poor beast had a rock stuck in its shoe, and he thought he could easily get it free, but this horse didn't seem to want to lift his foot to let Darcy look at it. "Shh," he murmured. "Quiet now."

This morning could not possibly be worse, he thought. First, he had botched his proposal to Elizabeth so badly that she'd run from him, and then he'd been cornered by that dreadful mother of hers, who kept saying she would "make" her daughter say yes, which did nothing to ease the blow to his ego.

He supposed that, now that he thought about it, Elizabeth had been rather sharp with him on more than one occasion. There was also the matter of her claiming to hate him when he had discovered her in the room, something that had slipped his mind for some reason. He'd been so focused on himself, he hadn't thought a bit about her.

He wouldn't say that he was skilled in the ways of wooing women, but he had a reputation of at least being a pleasant conversationalist, he thought. Women liked him. Most women, anyway. Or at least they pretended to. There was always Caroline Bingley, after all. She seemed to find him quite agreeable.

He ran his hands down over the horse's forelock. "Now, I'm just going to—"

"Mr. Darcy!"

The horse's ears flattened.

Darcy seized the reins, holding him still. "No, no, you're not going anywhere," he murmured at the horse.

Then he saw who had spoken.

It was Elizabeth. She was making her way through the fields, and her hair had come free in the front, wisps of it framing her face. She was flushed and pretty, like the time she'd appeared in the parlor at

Netherfield, a time when he'd done his best not to look at her, because it was like looking at the sun.

This time, he did not tear his gaze away.

"Oh, has something happened to your horse?" She slowed, eyeing the horse with some trepidation as she came closer.

Darcy tried to answer her, but his mouth was dry, and the words seemed stuck in his throat.

"I'm not overfond of horses." She stepped closer. "I didn't frighten him, did I? When I called your name?"

Darcy knew that she *had* frightened him, but he didn't say that. He was rendered utterly speechless currently, apparently. The morning sunlight had settled about her head, illuminating her loose strands of hair like a golden crown. She was stunning.

"I thought you would be back at Longbourn, so I went there first, but they said you had gone, so I came after you. I didn't think I had any hope of catching up. I thought I should have to walk all the way to Netherfield again, but here you are."

He managed a nod.

"Well, anyway, I suppose I should just say what I wanted to say when I sought you out. I, er, I may have been overhasty before."

"Oh?" A syllable. He had somehow urged a syllable from betwixt his lips.

"If you are still interested in marrying me, then I..." She sucked in a breath and let it out, her shoulders rising and falling. "Oh, I still do not understand it. It makes no sense to me whatsoever, and I can't for the life of me see... well, it hardly matters now, I suppose after what I said, you will not renew your proposal. You would, of course, tell me that you were far too offended to do so. Of course."

He attempted to speak, and nothing came out. But then he tried again. "I'm sorry, Miss Bennet, are you saying that you accept, after all?"

"I am," she said. "I don't know that we could ever be happy together, and I am bewildered by it all, but I would be foolish to say no, and I repent of having done so."

"You would be mine?" he breathed.

She seemed taken aback by that. Maybe it was because he was too affected in her presence. Maybe it was wretched that he was obviously so lovesick over this woman as to be a bumbling idiot and she clearly loathed him. He would change it if he could. He could not. She reached up to try to tuck her wayward strands of

hair behind one of her ears. "Yes, I suppose."

Some demon took hold of him, and he intercepted her, stopping her hand from touching the hair, which was such a beautiful halo.

Her eyes widened.

He had her hand in his now, and he tightened his fingers around hers.

She looked frightened, out of sorts.

Let go of her, he told himself.

"Mr. Darcy?" Her voice was insubstantial.

He tugged on her hand, pulling her close, and she staggered a bit and then collided with him. He reached up with his other hand and ran his fingers over her wisps of hair, which were soft. She seemed to be soft everywhere. He could feel the softness of her body through her clothes, because they were touching, the length of him pressed into her torso, one of his legs against her skirt... He looked at her lips, and they were wide and plump and sensuous, and then he looked into her eyes—a question, a warning.

She didn't resist when he kissed her. And kissing her was like being drenched in a waterfall, overtaking all his senses, dousing him with powerful sensation. He would like to kiss her forever. He would like never to stop.

His hand moved around to her neck. He stroked her behind her ear.

She gasped into his mouth.

He eased his tongue against hers.

She went tense against him.

He pulled back.

"Oh," she said in a very tiny voice.

He felt himself flush. "I, um, that is, I'm dreadfully sorry. I should not have... I don't know what possessed me..." He cleared his throat.

She put a finger to her bottom lip, and she gazed at him, seemingly shocked.

"I have scandalized you. I have taken liberties that I oughtn't have taken."

"No, no, that... it was... I am much obliged, thank you." She took a step backward.

* * *

I am much obliged? Elizabeth repeated to herself in her head. *Who says such a thing as that?*

She was sure that she had gone beet red. Her face felt as though it was on fire. That kiss, why had it been so marvelous? Why had she been unaware of how such a thing could feel, how it would make her weak and unbalanced, how it would be the single most pleasurable thing she had ever experienced?

Oh, and *why* had he kissed her?

He...

"If we are truly engaged, then kissing is permitted, but I ought not have simply stolen a kiss from you without your permission. That is, I am going about all of this wrong. I am making a mess of things. I understand you don't like me, but I seem to keep forgetting that. I'm sorry about that. I shall try to keep it in mind."

She cringed. "What makes you say I don't like you?"

"I think you told me that you hated me last night, did you not?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose I did." She shifted on her feet, wishing the blush would fade from her cheeks. "Well, you're very kind to, um, to agree to marry me. You obviously didn't have to do that."

"I couldn't leave you to suffer the ill-effects of an encounter that involved us both. And society is so horrible to women in that way. It's not the least bit fair."

"You don't think so?"

"Especially when it is quite rarely even the poor girl's fault. Blackguards take advantage of women, and the female sex is made to bear the brunt of the sins of the male sex, and I find it appalling."

"Yes, I can see how that might sometimes be the case, but in our case, there was no, er, sin on your part, so you were blameless and must not have any reason to be saddled with a marriage not of your choosing."

"No, I don't feel pressured to do many things that I do not choose, in fact. Such is the benefit of my birth, I suppose."

"Oh, yes," she said. "That's right, you're Mr. Darcy of Pemberley, aren't you?" She sighed, and she was satisfied at feeling a bit perturbed with him again. It was familiar, and this other feeling that she had towards him, the feeling that stole through her whenever he touched her, or sometimes when he only *looked* at her, that feeling was frightening and foreign.

"I have said it wrong again," he muttered. "I only meant that I have chosen to marry you. I suppose you feel forced, though."

"Well, I am in a bit of a predicament else," she admitted. "But you have never satisfactorily answered my question as to *why* you

have chosen to do such a thing.”

His face twitched, and he looked uncomfortable. “And I don’t see why you must keep harping upon that, Miss Bennet. I have chosen it, and you have accepted, and why poke and prod at it?”

“Because it doesn’t make sense,” she said. “You have no inducement to do it. And you don’t even like me.”

“Why would you say that? Of course I like you. I would not have asked you to marry me if I did not like you, would I?”

“Oh, I don’t know, a lot of people get married who don’t like each other. Or they like each other and then grow out of liking each other as time goes on. I had hoped to have a different sort of marriage, but now I am in this plight, and it is what it is.”

He looked at her with wide, almost wounded eyes.

She turned away.

“Let us go and share the news with your family, then,” he said finally. “I’m sure your mother will be overjoyed.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth.

“Well, at least someone will be.”

She glowered at him. “No one ever dared to dislike the great Mr. Darcy, is that it? You simply can’t bear it?”

“I can bear it,” he retorted, turning back to his horse. “I don’t know how you wish me to react. I don’t think anyone is pleased to learn that they are disliked.” He ran his fingers down over the horse’s leg.

The horse whinnied.

“Shh, now,” said Mr. Darcy to the horse, his gentle voice a contrast to the sharp way he’d just spoken to her. He lifted the horse’s foot.

The horse huffed, but it allowed Darcy to hold the foot. Its eyes were very wide.

“There now,” said Darcy. “I see it right there, my pretty. It will only be but a moment, I shall have the nasty out of that shoe of yours. Steady now.” He had a stick in his hand, and he put it against the horse’s foot. In a moment, the stone caught there came free, and it tumbled to the ground.

“Oh, well done,” said Elizabeth.

He gave her a look. “Did you just acknowledge something favorable about me?”

Her face twitched. “Did that rankle, sir? Be at ease, it will not happen again.”

"Oh, no, I could not bear that. Please, if there is anything you do appreciate, do say so. Your praise is all the more gratifying at having had it withheld hitherto." He swallowed, holding her gaze. His voice lowered. "I think I could get drunk on your approval."

She furrowed her brow. "Don't say things like that."

He continued to gaze at her, his eyelids hooded, as if he could not stop. Then, with seeming effort, he tore his gaze away. He drew in a breath, and then he shrugged. "I shall say whatever I like. If you're determined to hate me, anyway, what does it matter? I shan't secure your favor in any case." He stroked the horse and then gave a gentle tug on its reins. He began to walk, leading the horse with him. He did not look over his shoulder to see if she was accompanying him.

She glared after him and then started to follow. "I'm not 'determined' to hate you," she called. "I have reasons for it."

"Oh, yes? Would you be so kind as to share them with me?"

"Of course, as soon as you tell me why you're marrying me."

"I have already told you that."

"And the reason is?"

"I'm in love with you."

She scoffed. "You don't even know me."

"Yes, well, I am rather badly attracted to you, at least, and I like listening to you talk, and I have the most shocking fantasies about your bare shoulders, so it all comes to the same thing." He threw all this out casually, as if he was relating his feelings about the weather.

She, however, was agitated. "Monstrous!"

"What's monstrous? The bit about your bare shoulders? Yes, perhaps it's forward of me, but we are to be married, and so there will be a bit more than just our shoulders bare together, and—as I said—you already despise me, so I think I shall say whatever it is I like to you."

"You are *not* attracted to me," she said. "Stop saying such things. I can't understand why you would do it. It is a jest... are you laughing at me behind my back?"

"Why would it be a jest?"

"Is it some way to try to control me... to force me to your will?"

"As you say, Miss Bennet, I don't know you well, but I hardly think that you are a woman easily controlled."

She let out a noisy breath. "Oh, I cannot bear the sound of your

voice. Let us walk back to Longbourn in silence, by all means.”

He chuckled, glancing sidelong at her. “Perhaps I shall speak all the more?”

“You would vex me on purpose? You take pleasure in my discomfort?”

He hesitated. “No, I do not. I would that I could change your mind, in fact. Perhaps you will decide that you do not hate me so much, by and by. Do you think it’s possible?”

She rolled her eyes and did not answer.

“Hmm,” he said, sighing. He turned back to his horse. “Well, I think anything is possible.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The marriage was held with all haste, since there was an air of scandal about it all. Elizabeth tried to put out that she and Mr. Darcy had done nothing untoward, but Mr. Darcy seemed delighted by the idea that he had compromised her and did nothing to quell the rumors.

The man was truly a monster, she decided, and she did not know how she was going to bear being married to him.

A special license was procured, and the wedding was held on the following Saturday. None of Mr. Darcy's family attended. No announcement was run in the local papers. Even so, everyone in the congregation of their local church was in attendance, all whispering and buzzing over the salacious nature of the nuptials.

During the vows, Mr. Darcy would not take his eyes off her.

She found it very uncomfortable. She kept looking everywhere else. At the congregation. At the ceiling. At the parson reading from his script. And then her gaze would swing back to Mr. Darcy, who was drinking her in with a possessive look that made her feel both angry and shivery at once.

She had puzzled long and hard over Mr. Darcy's claim to be attracted to her, and she could not make sense of it. This way he was looking at her, it was lending credence to the idea that he was in earnest about it.

But then, why had he told Mr. Bingley that he did not find her handsome?

It was all bewildering. She did not understand.

So, finally, when she and Mr. Darcy were alone in the carriage that afternoon, bound for his townhouse in London, she simply asked him about it.

She had lingered a long time with her family, not wishing to depart with Mr. Darcy alone for this new life of hers. She had taken

her time with the wedding breakfast, eating slowly, having second helpings of all her favorites. She had taken the time to speak to everyone. She had talked overlong with her Aunt Philips and with each of her sisters, even Lydia, with whom she didn't have much in common. She had been loathe to leave Jane, even though Jane was distracted by the presence of Mr. Bingley, who they all assumed would ask for her hand as soon as Elizabeth's celebration was passed.

But eventually, there was no other way to delay, and she and Mr. Darcy were now in the carriage. They would be to London in time for a late supper. Elizabeth was nervous, and asking Mr. Darcy about his lies seemed the best way to distract herself from her nerves.

"Now, hear me," said Elizabeth. "The truth is, that first night that you were introduced to me, at the assembly in Meryton, I heard you speaking about me to Mr. Bingley."

He looked at her, stroking his chin in thought. "Did I speak about you that night?"

"You did. You refused to dance with me, because you said that I —"

"Oh." He cringed.

"There," she said, triumphant. "So, you see, there is no reason to keep up this charade that you are attracted to me. I know the truth of it. You said that I was not handsome enough to tempt you even to dance. And yet, you expect me to believe you were so swept away by my beauty that you married me? Come now, Mr. Darcy, tell me the truth of it, please. Why have you done this thing?"

"Listen, you have it backwards," he said. "I am not lying to you about finding you beautiful. I was lying to Mr. Bingley back then about what I thought of you."

"Why would you do that? What should it matter to him?"

"I needed an excuse to keep from dancing," said Mr. Darcy.

"Why? You were at a *ball*, sir. You do know what one is expected to do at a ball, don't you?"

He chuckled. "I am aware, yes."

"So, then?"

"I had business to attend to, and dancing would have been a distraction."

"You danced with both of Mr. Bingley's sisters."

"Yes, well, I didn't want anyone to know I was doing business. In

fact, I'd rather not talk about it with you. In time, perhaps I can share it all with you. You are now my wife, and our destinies are entwined, but considering you hate me, I would not trust you with it now. It is delicate information."

She furrowed her brow, trying to think through this. "So... you always thought I was pretty?"

"Oh, quite," he said. "I have never been so affected by a woman's beauty, in fact. You seem to have driven me mad." He sounded chagrined by it.

She was stunned. She sat back against the seat of the carriage and stared at him, unsure of what to think of this.

Mr. Darcy was driven mad by her beauty? That was like something out of a novel. That was... well, it was rather romantic, wasn't it?

Oh, dear, she didn't know what to do with that. She decided to latch onto something else as quickly as possible. "What kind of business must you keep secret? Is it to do with trade?"

"No, it's not that sort of business." He pulled the curtain aside from the window, looking out. "As I said, I'm not going to discuss it with you. And you'll find that I will be occupied with it much of the time when we are in London. I should like to get you settled, and we shall both..." He turned to look at her, then. His voice dropped, taking on a husky quality. "Well, there is tonight, of course."

A dark thrill went through her.

"But I shall be away from you more often than not undoubtedly," he said, turning back to the window. "Likely, this won't vex you, considering how much you dislike me anyway."

"Oh," she said. "Just so, yes. I shall be quite happy to entertain myself. I have no need of your company at all."

* * *

Mr. Darcy had procured Elizabeth a maid, saying that he'd assumed she would not want the bother of interviewing girls while she was occupied with settling in to her new household, but he told her she was welcome to do as she pleased.

Bess had been scrubbing floors, and he would send her back to that if she didn't please her new mistress. Darcy said this in front of Bess, who quaked a bit at the words of her master.

"Oh, don't speak to her thus," said Elizabeth. They had just arrived at the house. They were in the foyer, having been greeted by the servants, who even now were engaged in bringing in the

luggage from the carriage. "You'll give her a fright. I'm sure she will be a lovely maid."

"Yes, well, would you know?" said Mr. Darcy blandly. "I don't suppose you've ever had one of your own, have you?"

She glared at him. "Must you be this way?"

"What way?"

"Lording yourself over everyone?"

He blinked. "I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about." He raised his voice. "Georgiana? Where are you?" He turned to the housekeeper. "Where is my sister?"

"Oh, she's a bit..." The housekeeper, whose name was Mrs. Gibbs, winced. "Well, the letter telling her of your wedding and marriage, it only arrived yesterday, and she found it all rather shocking, I think. She's of an age, you know, sir. She has such moods."

Darcy sighed. "So, she's not coming down to greet us? To meet her sister-in-law?"

"She is ensconced in the sitting room upstairs and has declared she will open the door for no one," said Mrs. Gibbs.

"What of Miss Younge?"

"She's in there with her," said Mrs. Gibbs.

Darcy uttered a noise of disgust. "Well, I shan't stand for this." He marched up the stairs, leaving Elizabeth alone with Bess.

But everyone in the household heard the exchange that followed.

The sound of Mr. Darcy banging on a door filtered down.

"Georgiana, open this door this instant."

"I shan't," she called back. "You didn't even invite me to your wedding. I'm never speaking to you again."

"I had to marry her in haste, but she is here now. Come down and meet her."

"I won't."

"Georgiana, stop behaving like a child."

"Oh, I *am* a child, though, aren't I? You keep treating me as one!" Miss Darcy's voice was shrill, cutting through the floors and walls and ceiling rather clearly.

Elizabeth was put in mind of Lydia and Kitty, who were usually in a temper about one thing or other. Once, Kitty had cried herself sick—literally sick, she had cast up her accounts—over being told the family would not be attending a ball that took place on their father's birthday. She had told everyone that they did not care a jot

about her and that she would rather be dead than to be related to them.

As Elizabeth understood, Mr. Darcy's sister was of the same sort of age. She had heard her praises sung by Miss Bingley, however. She had no idea what to expect.

"If you don't open the door, I shall have Mr. Jennings come up from the stables and he shall remove the hinges, and I shall get in that way, so you might as well save us all the trouble."

"Do what you will. It is what you always do."

"Open the door!"

"I shan't."

Darcy's footsteps, angry. He appeared at the top of the steps.

"You won't wish to speak to her now, I'm afraid. She's in one of her tempers. I am sorry for it. I can't explain, but she's had a... a bad time of it, and it has affected her, I'm afraid. I..." He looked away.

"Perhaps I indulge her too much."

"Well... I think that young girls her age are often thus," said Elizabeth, starting up the steps. "Perhaps she will be in better spirits at dinner?"

"Yes, perhaps," said Mr. Darcy. "Have Bess dress you then, and we will all meet in the dining room in an hour."

* * *

One hour later, Elizabeth was in the dining room in her best dress (besides her wedding dress, which had been borrowed from Jane as there had been no time to have a new one made), which she realized Mr. Darcy had already seen at the Netherfield Ball. It was the dress he had helped her unbutton. She supposed she was going to have to have more dresses made, but she didn't know how to go about that. Certainly, Mr. Darcy's wife should have more than one good dress.

But if Mr. Darcy noticed her dress, he said nothing. His attention was entirely on his sister, who was sullen, refusing to look at Elizabeth, and only addressing Darcy now and then in a petulant voice.

"You said you would not leave me again." Georgiana was attacking a roll with a knife, fiercely sawing it in half. "After Ramsgate, you said you would not abandon me, and you did."

Mr. Darcy was not touching his food. "I admit, yes, I was away a bit longer than I expected. Perhaps you should have come along."

"Yes, then perhaps you wouldn't have been forced into a hasty

marriage.” Georgiana glared at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth sat up straight, narrowing her eyes.

“Georgiana, please,” said Mr. Darcy. “I assure you, my wife’s behavior was above reproach. I made an error, not her, so—”

“You made an error,” said Georgiana nastily. “Yes, well, isn’t that like a man.”

Darcy swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing above his cravat.

“I need to be excused.” Georgiana threw her knife down on her plate with a clatter.

“You have not even greeted your sister-in-law,” said Darcy tightly.

Georgiana stood up. “Good evening, Mrs. Darcy,” she said in a singsong voice.

“Georgiana,” said Mr. Darcy. “You can’t think—”

“I heard rumors already,” she said. “I heard rumors of you and her, my dear brother. You’re as much a beast as any of your sex.” She stalked out of the room.

Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, and he was pale. “I’m sorry. You must pardon her.”

“Is she...?” Elizabeth softened her voice in the girl’s wake. “What sort of a bad time do you mean?”

“I should go after her.” He set his napkin on the table.

“Perhaps if I did?” said Elizabeth. “She seems rather cross with you.”

“No, no, you... enjoy your dinner,” he said, getting to his feet. He turned and strode out of the room, head down.

Elizabeth was alone.

She used her fork to poke a boiled potato.

She waited.

But neither Mr. Darcy nor his sister ever returned to the table.

CHAPTER NINE

After she had eaten her fill, Elizabeth went up to her room. She wasn't sure what was to happen now. Mr. Darcy had made that pointed comment in the carriage, promising something was to happen tonight, on her wedding night.

She supposed she was prepared. She knew what was to happen, at least she thought she did. She was a bit curious about the mechanics of certain aspects, because she couldn't quite believe that everything would really quite fit that way. It sounded impossible, truly, but she hadn't asked questions about it, because she'd been too embarrassed, and her mother had also been embarrassed, and it was just bad all around.

At any rate, it seemed that it wouldn't be anything she needed to worry about that night when Mr. Darcy never appeared.

Elizabeth spent the evening trying to concentrate on a book, which she read in bed after Bess prepared her for sleeping. As the hour grew later and later, she began yawning, and she slipped under the covers, turned out her light, and fell asleep.

She was perhaps a bit disappointed that Mr. Darcy had not come to her, but mostly she was relieved. She did not like him, after all, and she didn't care for the way she felt when he touched her or kissed her. It was overwhelming and it frightened her. It made her feel out of control.

A delay in all of that was welcome.

She slept.

But she woke later, and it was still dark. She opened her eyes, listening, and she could hear that someone was in the room.

"Mrs. Darcy?" came the deep timbre of her husband's voice.

She slammed her eyes shut and pretended to be asleep.

He sighed.

She thought he would leave. How late must it be? He would

allow her to sleep. He would see her in the morning.

But she listened to the sounds of him moving about and she realized he was divesting himself of his clothes.

What was he doing? He didn't think to wake her up and... and take her?

She remembered his saying that she drove him mad.

Her breath hitched.

He heard it.

He pulled the covers aside and slid into the bed with her.

She was facing the wall, lying on her side, her knees bent.

He pressed himself against her back. "You're awake," he whispered.

She didn't answer him, but her breath picked up speed at his closeness. He did not seem to be wearing anything except his small clothes. He did not even have a nightshirt on. The warmth of his skin burned through the thin layer of her shift.

His lips were at the nape of her neck. She had her hair in a braid, and he gently place it over her shoulder to kiss the notches of her spine.

She drew in one shaky breath after another. The heat of his wet mouth there, it was quite unsettling. She had never felt such a thing.

One of his warm, large hands came to rest on her hip.

She made a noise in the back of her throat. She was beginning to feel as if she was too hot, as though a fire was kindling in her core, and she didn't know what to do about the way that it felt.

His fingers crawled over her hip, all the way down to the hem of her shift, which had hitched up a bit on her thigh as she had been sleeping. When his fingers touched the bare skin of her leg, she gasped.

The touch was good.

He pushed his fingers under the fabric of her shift. Slowly, he eased it up higher, dragging his hand over her thigh, dragging it all the way up to her waist, leaving shivers in the wake of his touch.

She could hardly breathe. She was frozen, but she had the strangest urge to writhe against him. She was conscious that the lower half of her body was entirely bare, and she also... liked that. She liked his hand there. It was quite, quite nice.

His fingers traced patterns over her hips and thighs, barely grazing over her.

Her skin puckered into goosebumps. She sighed.

His hand was on her inner thigh, where the skin was incredibly sensitive. It felt wondrous, but she was also sensible to the fact that there was some other part of her, some center of her, that he wasn't touching, but that seemed to be reacting as though he were touching it. There was a faint... pulse. A *pleasant* pulse.

He wedged a hand under her shoulder.

She was surprised, but she moved to accommodate him. That hand slid down over her chest and closed around one of her breasts.

She cried out. She had not thought something could feel so lovely.

At the same time, his other hand darted between her thighs, sliding against her.

She opened her thighs to give him better access.

He found that center part of her. Well, he seemed to fumble about it, moving on it and off it, and she used her gasps to guide him back, making them louder when he touched it until his forefinger began to encircle it, moving slickly against her as she began to fall apart.

How could it be so pleasant? What was he doing to her?

His mouth moved against her neck again, and he moved his hand away.

She let out a mew of disappointment.

He chuckled into her skin, a knowing chuckle, and it made her angry at him. Why was he stopping? Why was he such a devil of a man even during this?

And then something hot and thick and huge was pressing against her. It was some part of his body. It was his... oh, yes, this was what wasn't going to work, what wouldn't fit—

It fit.

She panted.

His fingers were back in the place that gave her pleasure. He groaned against her neck.

She made strangled noises, confused, because whatever he'd invaded her with, it was... she didn't know. Was it pleasant, or was the way he was touching her otherwise the pleasant part, was it just distracting from the fact *that* was moving against her, moving *within* her?

She was stretched and filled and he was so large, so insistent.

But then his fingers stroked her in a surprising and sublime way,

pushing her toward an apex, like a high, craggy cliff over a far away rushing stream, and he hung her there for several moments until she plunged downward, falling into rivers and *rivers* of pleasure, a strong current of it that battered her again and again, so much pleasure she didn't even think it was possible.

And then he grunted again, and he dug his fingers into her hip and went tense against her.

And...

And it was over.

He was raining kisses over her neck and shoulder, her jaw, her ear, sighing. His hands roamed over her, but somehow, they seemed sleepy.

She wondered if she should turn in his arms.

They had not even kissed again.

Shouldn't there have been kissing?

But he turned her face, claimed her lips with his own. He pulled away and smiled down at her. She could barely see his features in the darkness, but he looked at her with half-lidded eyes, something like awe written on his countenance.

"Well," he murmured. "That went well."

She bristled, squirming in his arms. The arrogance of this man was unparalleled.

But he was kissing her again, and his lips were warm and sweet, and she was lost to it.

By the time he had stopped, she was so stunned as to have forgotten anything but how nice it felt to have him hold her.

CHAPTER TEN

She woke alone in bed, bright light streaming around the curtains. She must have slept late.

She rose and rang for Bess, and then she noticed that there was a note left on her writing table. It was from Mr. Darcy.

My faultless and enchanting wife,

I did not wish to wake you. You were like an angel sleeping. I have business to attend to that will take me away from the house for a number of nights. I shall count the days until my return to your arms.

There is a matter I had forgotten about that you must see to in my absence. I have promised to have a dinner party, and it is important that Mr. George Wickham be invited. Please see to the invitations and the menu and all the various sundries.

Yours,

Fitzwilliam

Elizabeth blinked at the letter, her first thought a flare of annoyance at this request he'd made. She'd never hosted a dinner party in her life, let alone one in London. Who was she supposed to invite?

She somehow doubted that Mr. Darcy would be happy if she invited her uncle and aunt from Gracechurch Street.

On the other hand, maybe she didn't care whether or not Mr. Darcy was happy. Maybe she would delight in making him angry, because he was hateful.

Of course, this was when she looked at the beginning of the letter and her heart caught in her throat at the words he'd written there, because she felt rather affected by all of that.

He had said she was faultless?

She couldn't help but smile a silly little smile, and she shut her

eyes, recalling the night before, which seemed even more sweet now somehow, as if the ensuing time had encapsulated it into a kind of crystalline perfection. She wished she could keep it, put it on a shelf and take it down to relive it over and over again.

The way he had touched her. The way his fingers had felt. Their bodies joined together...

She sighed.

And the door opened, and Bess was there.

Elizabeth found herself blushing. She snatched up the letter and put it against her chest, unwilling for Bess to read what he'd written to her. She'd never received a love note before, and she didn't want to share the words with anyone. They were hers and hers alone.

Of course, then she thought about how self-assured he'd been afterwards, basically congratulating himself on satisfactorily bedding her, and how difficult could it be, truly? She pressed her lips together.

"Good morning," said Bess.

"Oh, good morning," said Elizabeth, opening a drawer and tucking the letter inside. "Is it quite late? Don't let me sleep so late in the future, if you don't mind."

"I thought perhaps you were tired from yesterday."

Elizabeth flushed again.

"I mean, from your journey yesterday," said Bess, also flushing. She hurried past Elizabeth. "Shall I lay out some dresses for you to pick from?"

"Yes, thank you," said Elizabeth, sinking down in the chair at her writing desk. "I also would like to have some dresses made. Do you know how I would go about that? Should I go out to buy fabric?"

"Buy fabric yourself?" said Bess, turning to her.

"I suppose not," said Elizabeth.

"We'll have some brought here," said Bess. "I'll speak to someone about it. I can manage all that, of course." She looked a little worried.

"If it's trouble for you, if there's someone else I should speak to —"

"No, no, it's fine. I am quite capable," said Bess, pawing through Elizabeth's wardrobe. "There really isn't much to choose from here, is there? I noticed when I was hanging things from your trunk last night. You're in desperate need of new dresses. We shall remedy it as soon as we can."

Elizabeth stood up, looking her over. "Listen, if you're worried about Mr. Darcy, I don't want you to."

"He is a good master," said Bess. "But he is very particular. He likes things a certain way, and I don't want to displease him."

"You are my maid," said Elizabeth. "You worry about me, not him." She let out a frustrated breath. "Oh, he can be such a wretched man."

Bess didn't respond.

Elizabeth decided it was probably not a good idea to say too much. Maids did gossip, of course. She couldn't have it getting out that she wasn't happy with her husband.

* * *

When she was dressed, she went down for breakfast. Georgiana was nowhere to be found, but Elizabeth heard the sounds of a piano drifting down from the upper levels of the house.

That was a puzzle, wasn't it?

What bad time had Georgiana had? Why had it soured her on men? Why was she so horrible to her brother out of one side of her mouth and then devastated to have been left alone out of the other?

Elizabeth could not help but be curious, but she doubted she would learn any answers from Georgiana herself, who didn't seem disposed to like Elizabeth. She would let the girl alone for now. Hopefully, in time, she would warm up to her.

For now, Elizabeth ate her breakfast and then sought the housekeeper below the stairs.

"Oh," said Mrs. Gibbs. "Already down here to give some instruction?"

"Actually, I come for assistance," said Elizabeth. "It seems to me that you have this household well in hand, having been running it long before I came. I shall be happy to do anything that will help, of course, but I don't have any intention of upsetting the apple cart."

Mrs. Gibbs had to smile at that. "I think you and I shall like each other, Mrs. Darcy. What assistance do you need?"

"Well, I've been left instructions by my husband that I must throw a dinner party, and he has been rather maddeningly vague on the details. I am to see to the menus and invitations, but he has not told me who to invite besides one person, a Mr. George Wickham, who I don't even know."

"Mr. Wickham?" Mrs. Gibbs furrowed her brow. "Well, that's odd."

"Is it?"

"Mr. Wickham is an old boyhood friend of Mr. Darcy's, I suppose. Maybe that's why he wants him to come to dinner. But he is not a gentleman's son. He is the son of the steward of Pemberley. It hardly seems proper to invite him."

"Well, he was quite clear," said Elizabeth.

"And of course he's gone now and we can't ask anything of him," said Mrs. Gibbs. "You are correct, madam, it is maddening."

Elizabeth couldn't help but laugh.

"Well, we shall do our best. I have some things to attend to now, but perhaps I could join you just before luncheon? We shall sit down and try to sort out a guest list and a menu? Would that suit you?"

"I would be in your very debt."

"Now, now, just doing my job." Mrs. Gibbs winked at her. "And if you have any apple cart upsetting to do, I shall be happy to assist you." She laughed as she took her leave of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth went back upstairs and found a woman in the hallway that she had not met. She was dressed in a green dress, and she had a set of spectacles perched atop her head.

"Oh," she said. "You must be Mrs. Darcy."

"I am," said Elizabeth. "And you are?"

"Oh, I am Miss Darcy's governess." She offered her hand. "Miss Younge is my name. I'm sorry I did not join you for dinner last night. I had the evening to myself, already arranged, and I went to see some friends for a lovely little party. I was sorry to leave poor Miss Darcy in such a state. She is little improved this morning, I am afraid."

"I am sorry for that," said Elizabeth, unsure of what to say.

"Yes, it's all dreadful," said Miss Younge. "Has Mr. Darcy spoken much to you about his sister?"

"Very little," said Elizabeth. "It's all quite a mystery to me, in fact. He said she'd had a bad time, but he did not elaborate."

"Probably for the best. It's nothing to dwell on," said Miss Younge.

"Did she have a falling out with a suitor?"

"Miss Darcy is not yet out in society," said Miss Younge, laughing a bit. "She has no suitors."

"Oh," said Elizabeth, furrowing her brow. "It's only that she seems rather... I don't know how to put it. Bitter, perhaps?"

“She gets angry sometimes,” said Miss Younge. “But more often than not, she is simply sad. She will cry with abandon for hours, and I can’t find a thing to do for her. It’s good for my own disposition to have those nights away, I suppose.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, who was finding—perhaps for no good reason—that she did not like Miss Younge.

But then, of all the people in this household, the only ones she was finding the least bit agreeable were the servants.

She retired to her room to write a letter to Jane, hoping that her sister would write back with happy tidings of her own engagement. Elizabeth wasn’t sure exactly what to say to Jane. She felt as if she could not write about her feelings toward Mr. Darcy. They were warring feelings. On the one hand, she found him the most annoying, arrogant man in all of England, and on the other, she got a strange aching tingle when she thought about his hand on her bare thigh.

In fact, thinking of being with him, she shut her eyes, drawing a breath, affected by the memory.

That was something she could not write to Jane about. Doing something so improper was unthinkable.

But neither could she complain about Mr. Darcy, either. That would make Jane worry.

She not feel as if she could write about what had happened with Miss Darcy either. It seemed some sort of dreadful family secret, and that it would be betrayal to tell anyone of it.

So, her letter was frightfully vague and bare. She spent most of her time begging for news of home and telling Jane to write to her faithfully.

By the time she was finished, it was time to meet with Mrs. Gibbs to plan the dinner party. They put together a small guest list, only three other couples, married friends of Mr. Darcy from his youth, who Mrs. Gibbs said had dined at the house before.

They planned the meal, and then it was time for luncheon.

Elizabeth joined Georgiana and Miss Younge to eat, but neither of them were very talkative. Georgiana attended to her plate and never looked up, and Miss Younge had brought a book to the table and read while eating.

Elizabeth supposed that the two of them typically only had each other’s company and there was no reason for them to socialize during lunch when they had all day together, but she found it

unpardonably rude that the governess would do such a thing.

She tried to draw Georgiana into a conversation, asking her about the piano-forte, because she had heard from Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst that Georgiana was quite talented.

But Georgiana would do no more than acknowledge that she did play and that she enjoyed it. And all of this she did without looking up at Elizabeth, but kept her eyes on her food.

Elizabeth finished eating rather quickly. Since no one was paying her any mind, she excused herself from the table. When she got up, she looked down the table at Georgiana's and Miss Younge's profile. From this vantage point, they looked nearly identical, the shapes of their noses and chins similar, both bent over the table, neither paying any mind to anyone else.

Her absence was nothing to either of them.

She was a bit disappointed. If Mr. Darcy was going to be away on this strange business of his for long periods of time, then she would be trapped here with no one but the two women, and they weren't good company. It was sure to be lonely.

However, perhaps it was better than the chaos of her home. Her mother and younger sisters were often noisy and high strung. She might consider this a pleasant and quiet holiday.

Back in her room, Elizabeth considered amending her letter to Jane to complain about Miss Younge's behavior, but decided it would only make her seem petty and instead turned to composing the invitations for the dinner party.

Once finished, they were turned over to be sent out with the mail.

By then it was still early afternoon, and the rest of the day stretched out in front of Elizabeth with nothing to fill it. She sought out the small library in the townhouse for something to read. Most of the books were volumes of poetry or plays. There was a vast selection of ancient Greek and Roman plays, bound in volumes along the shelf. Elizabeth thought of her discussion of Helen of Troy. It seemed such a long time ago now.

No, she wasn't in the mood for such things.

Pawing through, she found a lone volume of something vaguely contemporary, some poetry by Wordsworth. None of these things excited her, but she seized the Wordsworth and Sophocles and took them both back to her room.

Once there, she gazed out the window, thinking about Mr. Darcy

the night before, the way his body had fit against hers, the heat of his body, the firmness of it. The way he had touched her, the way her pleasure had risen to meet his fingers.

She felt dark and shivery and allowed herself to be lost to her reverie for nearly an hour, which was a frightfully long time, she thought.

Eventually, though, she decided that she must not continue to think such favorable thoughts toward the man, because he did not deserve it. He was arrogant, secretive, and absent. And if she could but convince herself to look upon him with naught but annoyance, that would be a layer of protection against him.

Because she did feel as if she was in danger, as if she were now tethered to Mr. Darcy in some unfathomable way. Of course, she knew that she *was* tethered to him. They were married, and they had been declared one flesh in the eyes of the Lord and the church and the law. But... this tie between them, it was deeper than that. It frightened her, because of the power of it, because she felt that it might tug her under dark water and leave her there to drown.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elizabeth did not expect Mr. Darcy to return that night. His letter had said he would count the days until he could return to her, so she expected him to be gone a number of days and nights. She wished he would have told her exactly how long he would be gone, so that she could also count the days, but he was not considerate in that way, was he?

Even still, when she woke in the middle of the night and heard someone in the hallway, she thought perhaps it was Mr. Darcy.

She waited for her door to open, for him to come to her in the darkness as he had the night before, but he didn't. Surely, if it was Mr. Darcy, he would wake her. He had shown no concern for her sleep on their wedding night.

He likely wasn't even home.

But she found that she needed to know for sure, so she got up out of bed and pulled on a bed jacket. She stepped into the hallway, and she saw no one. She started to move in the direction of Mr. Darcy's bedroom, but she heard voices filtering up the stairwell from below.

Probably servants, she thought. But she moved toward the stairwell anyway, and began to tiptoe down the steps, closer to the sound of the voices.

She halted in the shadows when she saw the two figures speaking in the darkness.

It was not servants.

"I have told you not to throw rocks at my window in the middle of the night," Miss Younge was saying. She was wearing her nightclothes and her braided hair was mussed from sleeping. She was addressing a man, who was dressed except for his cravat, which was very loose around his neck.

He was smiling. "I have to talk to you sometime, don't I? If you

close every other avenue to me, then what other choices do I have?"

"You and I cannot be seen together under this roof!" Miss Younge was furious. "You know I have days when I am free to go as I please in town. When I have news for you, I seek you out then."

"You seek me out when you are looking for coin, Amelia," said the man. "And I begin to question your usefulness to the entire enterprise. You weren't even able to tell the news of your charge. I had to discern that myself. If it hadn't been for me, there wouldn't be any coin."

"You've come here in the middle of the night to tell me that I'm not useful?"

"No, no," said the man. "I've come to ask about Darcy's whereabouts. I thought he came home, and yet I've still no invitation."

Invitation? Elizabeth thought of the dinner invitations she'd sent out that afternoon. Could he be talking about that?

"He left again," said Miss Younge. "And I suppose you know that he's gotten married?"

"What?" The man shook his head. "No, I hadn't heard. That's quite quick. Did he compromise this woman?"

Miss Younge chuckled.

The man laughed too. "For all his moral outrage, hmm?"

"True, true," said Miss Younge. "But you need to go now. You cannot be here with me."

"I see I'll have to make sure he understands the seriousness of not keeping his word to me," said the man.

"Out." Miss Younge pointed toward the front door. "Now."

The man clucked his tongue at her, but he left. He took his time about it, but eventually, he was out of the front door, and Miss Younge was coming for the steps.

Elizabeth hurried out of the way before the governess could see her. She shut herself into her room soundlessly and began to pace in the darkness.

What had that been about?

It couldn't be good.

Was that man a sweetheart of Miss Younge? He had called her by her first name, which suggested a certain amount of familiarity. But there had been no affection between them, so Elizabeth didn't think so.

There was a suggestion of money, as if they were in some sort of arrangement for pay.

Elizabeth didn't know, but she thought it sounded remarkably like Miss Younge and this man were blackmailing someone. And she was fairly certain the man was Mr. Darcy, because they had discussed him.

Elizabeth did not think that Mr. Darcy knew that Miss Younge was in on the scheme. She should probably tell him, shouldn't she?

Oh, yes, because he had been so forthcoming with her.

And it wasn't as if he was here, anyway, was it? He was busy with his business, something he would not explain to her. He wouldn't tell her where he was or what he was doing. He wouldn't tell her what had happened to his sister. He was a secretive sort of man.

Perhaps Elizabeth should keep her own secrets. They might be useful to her later on.

Of course, she must consider that Miss Younge and this man could harm her if they harmed Mr. Darcy, because she well knew that they were tethered together, did she not? So, if it became obvious that she was keeping this secret to her own detriment, she would tell him at once.

For now, however, she would simply keep her own counsel. And she would find out what she could about Miss Younge in the meantime. The more she understood, the better.

* * *

In the morning, Elizabeth wondered if she'd dreamed the entire escapade. It was like something from a novel, secrets and clandestine meetings at midnight. Maybe her overactive imagination had produced it. Maybe she'd never woken at all.

But her bed jacket was crumpled on a chair by her bed, proving it had all been reality, and she was confident in such things once more. She was awake early that morning, and when she arrived at breakfast, Georgiana was there, but Miss Younge was notably absent.

"How long has Miss Younge been your governess?" said Elizabeth.

Georgiana looked up at her, blinking. "Good morning, Mrs. Darcy."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, good morning. As we both know, you are so interested in exchanging pleasantries with me. Do

you like her?"

"Who?" Georgiana took a sip of her chocolate, surveying Elizabeth coolly, her expression almost identical to her brother's.

"Miss Younge, of course," said Elizabeth. "How does she compare to your other governesses?"

"I wouldn't know. She's the only one I've ever had," said Georgiana. "I had a nanny up until this summer. I think my brother is incapable of noticing that I am growing up."

"So, she has only been with you since summer?" said Elizabeth.

"She joined me just before I made an outing to Ramsgate," said Georgiana. "My nanny was not one for travel. She was not one for much, indeed. She took long naps in the afternoon and left me to my own devices."

"Which you prefer to Miss Younge's constant presence?" said Elizabeth.

"Why these questions?" Georgiana stabbed her fork into a sausage.

"How much do you know about her? Did she come with references?"

"My brother handled all of this, of course," said Georgiana. "I was not consulted. I am never consulted in anything."

Elizabeth sighed.

Further discussion of Miss Younge was prevented when the woman herself entered the dining room. The meal continued in much the way that all meals had been conducted since Elizabeth had arrived here, in silence. At dinner the night before, Miss Younge had not brought a book, but she had not bothered to make conversation either, and Elizabeth had followed suit.

It was strange. Elizabeth was used to a boisterous meal, all of her sisters fighting for attention to speak.

The silence, it was beginning to rankle her, even though she could have sworn that all she ever wanted was peace and quiet. Even Lydia's whining would be welcome now.

While Miss Younge continued her breakfast, Elizabeth left the room and climbed all the way to the top of the steps where the governess's quarters were. After making quite sure that there were no servants around to see her, she let herself into the woman's room.

The room was modest, bigger than a servant's room but not as large as Elizabeth's. The writing desk was empty except for a few

pieces of paper and a pen and ink. Nothing was left behind that the woman had written on.

A noise in the hallway. A creak, as though someone was approaching.

Elizabeth straightened, her pulse beginning to race.

She waited for several long moments, ready to thrust herself into the wardrobe and cower there with the door closed if necessary, but there was no other noise.

She tiptoed to the door and peered outside.

Nothing there.

Must have been the house settling or a rat or something horrid.

She must be done with her business here quickly.

She turned to Miss Younge's trunk and flung it open. It was mostly empty, Miss Younge's clothing in the wardrobe.

But there were a few blankets in it and a book of poetry. Elizabeth picked it up and opened it. There was an inscription inside.

To my darling Mary from your own Jonathan Darcy.

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. Who was Jonathan Darcy? He wasn't her Mr. Darcy, and her husband had no brothers, so this must be some other man. Who could it be? His father? Another relation?

Who was Mary?

That wasn't Miss Younge. Her first name was Amelia, if the man downstairs last night could be believed. Why did she have this book?

CHAPTER TWELVE

At luncheon, Elizabeth casually inquired about the Darcy family, saying she was curious on account of this being her family now, as well.

Georgiana confirmed that Jonathan Darcy had indeed been her father. She also said that she had been young when her father and mother had succumbed to the same illness. She said she didn't wish to speak on it any further.

Elizabeth already knew that Mr. Darcy had inherited young, but she realized that this mean he'd been young when his parents had passed, both at once, and she felt sorry for him, all that responsibility on his young shoulders. Maybe that was why he was so serious and grim all the time. He had been through quite a lot in his life, hadn't he?

Maybe she was too hard on him.

After all, what had he truly done that was so terrible? She had disliked him because of his pride and his arrogance, yes, but hadn't it all had its root in Mr. Darcy insulting her at the ball? But now she knew he had never thought such a thing about her, so why did she blame him?

Then she thought of the cavalier way he had dismissed the whole of society's ladies, claiming he knew only half a dozen who were truly accomplished, and she decided she was not being too hard on him at all.

Bess informed her that fabric had been brought for her to look through to decide upon for new dresses. Irritatingly, while Georgiana and Miss Younge had shown little interested in anything having to do with her before, they both insisted on being present as Elizabeth examined the fabric and on offering their opinions on what she should choose for her new dresses.

Elizabeth found herself taking their advice more often than not

because she doubted her own opinions. She was not sure what she should wear, and she did want to fit in well here in her new life. Much had been made during Mr. Darcy's proposal about the difference between their stations, and she found that it had shaken her confidence.

Late that afternoon, a man called at the house. He was in the entrance hall with the butler, asking after Mr. Darcy when Elizabeth came down the steps in the midst of the conversation.

The man looked up at her. He was handsome in a boyish way with a wide, white smile, which he turned on her. "Well, what have we here? Who is this lovely vision?"

He was the man who had been talking to Miss Younge.

The butler looked back and forth between them. "I'm not sure it's appropriate for me to conduct an introduction, but this is Mr. Wickham, Mrs. Darcy." He turned to Mr. Wickham. "This is Mr. Darcy's new wife."

"Well, lucky Darcy," said Mr. Wickham with a chuckle.

"I think it must be all right," said Elizabeth to the butler, looking Mr. Wickham over. She wished to speak to this man, not least because he knew that Mr. Darcy was not home. He had confirmed it from Miss Younge in the middle of the night. Why call when he knew there was no chance of speaking to the man of the house? "I know that Mr. Wickham was a childhood friend of my husband's, and that Mr. Darcy wished especially for me to invite Mr. Wickham to a dinner party here."

"Yes, and it is on account of that lovely invitation that I have come," said Mr. Wickham. "I will heartily accept. And this solves the mystery of whose hand penned the invitation, for it did not seem to be Mr. Darcy's, my dear friend."

Too much emphasis on the word dear?

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes.

Mr. Wickham smiled all the wider. "Well, if Mr. Darcy is not here, I suppose I must be on my way."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," said Elizabeth. "Do come into the sitting room. We must become acquainted, sir, if you are such a dear friend of my husband's."

The butler's eyes widened. "I hardly think so, Mrs. Darcy, I must say."

Elizabeth gave him a look. "Oh?" Why was that? Did the butler know of Mr. Wickham's treachery?

Whereas Wickham was looking at the butler with a wounded expression on his face. "I think I must ask for an explanation, mustn't I? Why would you say such a thing?"

The butler turned to Mr. Wickham with a chagrined look on his face. "Well, you are hardly introduced, are you? How can that be proper?"

"Mr. Darcy invites me into his home, does he not?" Mr. Wickham waved the invitation into his face. "I have received an invitation written in this woman's very hand, have I not?"

The butler only sighed heavily.

"Surely," pressed Elizabeth, "there must be some reason you've come, Mr. Wickham. Is there anything I can do for you?" She was curious about this man. She did not understand anything.

"I shan't stay if it is not considered proper," said Mr. Wickham, putting his hat back on his head. He touched the brim. "Perhaps I came only to see if the rumors about the beauty of Mr. Darcy's new wife were exaggerated." He winked at her. "I see they are not."

A chill went through her, because she wondered if Mr. Wickham had indeed come only to see her. If so, she didn't know what to make of it. There was something in his expression, something hard. She didn't like him. She was frightened of him. She did not wish for him to have a special interest in her.

Why had Mr. Darcy insisted on inviting this man to dinner? If Mr. Wickham were blackmailing Mr. Darcy, had Wickham forced him into it? If so, that lent a more sinister air to everything.

And it disturbed her that Mr. Darcy had so casually pulled her into it all, without even explaining it to her. Mr. Darcy kept far too many secrets.

Mr. Wickham was still smiling. "Thank you for the invitation, Mrs. Darcy. I shall see you again quite soon."

Elizabeth felt the words like a threat.

* * *

Several days passed without incident. New dresses were brought for Elizabeth one morning, and Bess insisted that she try them on, and Georgiana and Miss Younge insisted on seeing them as well, even though they reacted dispassionately to everything, only giving small smiles each time she came out in a new dress.

Elizabeth was wearing a lovely lavender ball gown, and she had decided that she was not going to traipse about for either of them any longer. She would tell them that she had a headache and then

try the rest of the dresses on in private, swearing Bess to secrecy—for of course she would need her maid to try them on. She was debating whether or not Bess would actually keep it a secret, when news came that Mr. Darcy was home.

She was stunned at the force of her physical response to the news.

It was as though she had received a blow to her stomach. It was a forceful feeling, sharp and intense. She could not say that it was pleasant. After the initial sensation faded, she was jumpy and tense, feeling as though her entire body was jangling like a bell.

She resolved that she would not go down to greet him.

But then Georgiana and Miss Younge both went down and she could not help but follow. She wondered if he would notice her dress. Would he like it?

Georgiana seemed in better spirits than the last time she had seen him. She went to him and took both his hands in hers and looked up at him and said that she had missed him and he must not leave her again. She called him Fitz.

He gazed at his sister tenderly. “Hopefully soon I won’t to have to leave at all, once I settle all this.” Then he raised his gaze to see Elizabeth. His eyes crawled greedily over her, taking in her bare arms and the low-cut neckline of the dress. Finally, his eyes met her eyes.

She couldn’t breathe.

“Mrs. Darcy, is there a reason you’re in an evening gown in the middle of the day?” His voice was a little hoarse.

She flushed. “I... it is new. I was trying on my dresses.”

“Ah.” He flicked his gaze away, clearing his throat. “Well, all of you, I’ll be locked in my study for the rest of the day. I have things to see to.” He moved quickly past the women and went up the stairs without a backwards glance.

Elizabeth drew in a long, slow breath. Well, how like him to be so dismissive. How like him to be so rude. Especially after the way he’d looked at her, making her feel as if he’d been ready to peel the dress off her. And then to dismiss her, without so much as an acknowledgment of anything?

She hated her husband.

Well.

She *should* hate him. She wasn’t sure why she didn’t.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mr. Darcy did not appear at dinner.

"I should get used to it, if I were you," said Georgiana, passing her spoon through her soup. "He is often thus. He spends most of his time alone and he pays the rest of us little mind."

"How can the man of the house not come down for dinner?" said Elizabeth. "Surely, a man like Mr. Darcy wishes to preserve some sense of propriety."

"Well, he did marry you," said Georgiana, shrugging.

Elizabeth's lips parted.

Georgiana lifted her gaze from her soup, a lilting little smile on her face.

Elizabeth tightened her grip on her spoon.

"Mr. Darcy only ever wants to speak of books I haven't read," said Miss Younge. "Personally, I do not miss his company."

"Well, one might make the argument that is better to speak of *something* than to sit in dull silence all the time," said Elizabeth in a strained voice.

Miss Younge mused over this. "That, it would seem to me, is entirely a matter of personal taste. And I must say that I don't quite agree. I do despise forced conversations. So awkward."

Georgiana glanced at her governess. "Yes, it's quite obvious that you're never interested in conversation."

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Miss Younge to Georgiana. "Honestly, your manners, Miss Darcy, they are not what they should be. I know that you were allowed to run wild before I appeared, but I must say that you will have to learn how to be a proper young lady at some point—"

"Why?" said Georgiana.

"What?" said Miss Younge. "Don't say such a thing, my dear. Now, beg my pardon and give me some credible excuse. Ladies may

often claim that they have a headache which troubles them and makes it difficult for them to think."

"You mean I should lie?" said Georgiana. "Listen, it doesn't matter, Miss Younge. What do you think you're preparing me for? I'm not going to debut in society, and I'm most certainly never getting married. I shall live out my life as a spinster with my brother, and I shall have enough money to be as eccentric as I please. My brother only keeps you around because he wants someone to keep an eye on me. Of course, he's too busy to do it himself."

Miss Younge set down her spoon. "This entire outburst is untoward, Miss Darcy. If you cannot speak politely, you may leave the table."

"I thought we weren't speaking at all," said Elizabeth.

Miss Younge rounded on her. "You must not encourage her in what she is saying. She is not behaving in a ladylike manner, as we both well know."

Georgiana lifted more soup to her mouth and loudly slurped it into her mouth.

Miss Younge's eyes widened.

Georgiana gave her an innocent look.

Elizabeth couldn't help but laugh.

Miss Younge huffed.

Elizabeth composed herself.

But Georgiana gave Elizabeth a small smile, and Elizabeth felt as if she might have just won a small battle in the war for her sister-in-law's friendship. If they united in dislike for Miss Younge, it would be at least one thing they had in common.

* * *

After dinner, she went to Mr. Darcy's study and knocked.

"I'm not to be disturbed, I said," he called from within.

"It is your wife," she said.

"I'll be with you later, Mrs. Darcy," he called. "I can't bother with whatever it is you want from me now."

She drew back from the door in disgust. He'd be with her later, would he?

She didn't think so.

If he thought he was going to wake her in the middle of the night again and find her willing and ready for him, he was quite mistaken. If he didn't have time for her, she didn't have time for

him.

Thus resolved, she retired early to bed, but she didn't sleep, because she was still so angry with him. Instead, she stayed awake fuming for hours, expecting him to arrive at any minute.

When he did not, and the hour grew later and later, she continued to stay awake, this time out of sheer annoyance to see when he would show his face. She sat up in bed, reading Wordsworth for lack of anything else to do, and the hours ticked by.

She began to think he would not come at all, and this disappointed her, and she was angry with herself for her disappointment, for wasn't she going to refuse him anyway when he came to the room?

In the end, she fell asleep after all, and she woke to kisses, Mr. Darcy's mouth sweet on hers, soft and yet insistent. He was next to her in bed. He was not wearing any clothes at all, and the kisses roused her in more ways than one. She awoke with a tight ache inside her, and his heat and nearness were affecting her.

She was tired, having only slept for a short time, and she struggled to summon her anger at him. She found some thread of it, somewhere, but it seemed wound up in whatever that ache was.

She pushed on his shoulders. "You must go."

"What?" he murmured. He was unbuttoning the front of her shift.

"I am tired," she said. "I want you to leave me alone." But her voice hitched at the end. She didn't sound very convincing.

"I'm afraid I can't agree to that." His hand was easing inside the collar of her shift, where he had unbuttoned it. His hand was large and his fingers were thick and warm, and he knew just where to touch her.

She gasped. "Stop it, I mean it."

"You wouldn't be sighing like that if you really wanted me to stop," he breathed, kissing her neck in a place that was a revelation. She had never felt anything like that.

She was awash in shivers and goodness. "Mr. Darcy, attend to me." Her voice was trembling. "I am saying that I do not wish this, and you are ignoring me. That is monstrous, sir."

"Yes, it does feel like the sight of you wakes a monster within me," he said, sounding amused. "I am quite out of control when it comes to you." He kissed her again.

Oh, why was kissing him so wonderful? What was it about his mouth on hers? Why did it undo all her resolve? She kissed him

back, stroking her tongue against his, and his hands danced inside her shift, and it was all bursting bliss. She was a wreck of moans and sighs, and her body was going taut and sensitive at his touch. She pulled away, gasping. "You must control yourself. You must stop."

"I can't," he said, groaning, and his knees were pushing her thighs apart, and his mouth was tracing a hot line over her shoulder, and she was gasping at the goodness of it.

"You would not give me any of your time earlier," she said. "Why should I give you my time now?"

He lifted his face from her skin. "Oh, my darling, I do apologize. But I told you that my business would keep me busy, did I not? It is not because I do not want to be with you. The memory of your body has tormented me. If I could, I would do nothing but spend every moment in your bed."

She let out a ragged breath. "Well, I want you out of my bed now."

He raised up and caught her gaze.

She looked into his eyes in the darkness. She could make out the shape of his features. She could see that he was searching her expression.

"Do you truly?" he murmured.

She tried to say yes, but that would mean she was left in this lonely bed, and he was so warm, and she did so like being close to him, and he was so skilled with his lips and hands, and... "You are a wretched man, and I hate you," she said instead.

"That is not a yes, Mrs. Darcy," he said, and he sounded amused again. "Do you wish me to stop? Do you wish me to go?"

She kissed him instead. Initiating the kiss made him respond all the more fiercely. He made a low growl in the back of his throat, and his hands on her were all the more urgent.

She clung to him.

Mr. Darcy was the very devil.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The next morning, she awoke alone in bed again. She thought it must be normal for married couples. There was a reason they had their own beds, after all, but she found that it disappointed her. He had fallen asleep wrapped around her the night before, whispering careless and barely intelligible things to her about her beauty and perfection and how much he adored her. He had closed his arms so tightly around her that it had felt as if he never wanted to let her go. In fact, he might have said something like that, one of his breathless murmurings, that he would never let go of her.

But he had, obviously. He was gone.

She called for Bess and she went looking for him. He was not in his room, so she checked his study. Instead of knocking, she tried the door. It opened.

He was sitting at his desk, a plate of food to one side as he scribbled furiously with his pen. When the door opened, he looked up at her.

“Good morning,” she said brightly. “Why don’t you leave that and come down to breakfast?”

“Mrs. Darcy, I’m glad you’re here.” He set his pen in its holder and stood up from his desk. “We need to issue some further invitations for the dinner party. You only invited people that Mr. Wickham already knows.”

“Was I given any instruction on who to invite?” She folded her arms over her chest, glaring at him.

“No, you weren’t,” he said. “It’s not a slight against you. You did as well as you could, but you have no experience with such things and I did not give you enough guidance. I kept glancing at your sleeping form while I was writing that note and thinking...” The bottom dropped out of his voice.

She felt a fire start to kindle in her core, lit by the way he was

looking at her. Oh, blast, why did he have such an effect on her?

Abruptly, he stalked across the room and shut the door. He closed the distance between them and stopped, inches from her. He swallowed. He reached up and pressed his palm against her cheek.

She shut her eyes.

"I kept thinking about the way it felt to be buried in you, surrounded by you, and I wanted to wake you and have you again." His voice was raw.

She opened her eyes, shuddering in spite of herself.

"I knew I had to leave, but you... I can't think properly in your presence. Lord, Elizabeth, I knew you'd be a distraction, but I had no idea..."

She kissed him.

His other hand came up to cup her other cheek, and he held her in place as his lips moved against hers.

The kiss went on for a long time.

When he pulled away, they were both out of breath.

She felt as though she might lose her balance, because her legs were unsteady, and she reached inside herself for some kind of strength. And what came out was, "No experience with such things? You don't need to hold my hand and guide me, Mr. Darcy. I am not as ignorant and useless as you assume."

He let out a panting sort of laugh. "You are determined to be angry with me, aren't you?"

"You make it rather easy, sir."

"Well, what did I expect? You do not like me, after all." He ran a hand through his hair.

"No," she whispered. "I don't."

He turned away from her. "You must send an invitation to Mr. Grantley, and Sir Edginton and his wife, as well as Mrs. Galloway. She's a widow. I think that should round the evening out nicely. Should I write that down for you?"

"No need," she said in a tight voice. "I shall remember."

"Perhaps I should at least repeat myself."

She sucked in a breath through her nose. "I've changed my mind. I'd prefer it if you didn't come down for breakfast after all." She swept out of the room.

* * *

But she did not go directly to breakfast, but instead back to her room to write out those invitations before the names did in fact slip

her mind. She would need to consult with Mrs. Gibbs to find out addresses for the new guests, and she would have to tell her that they would need more food since there would be more guests. It was becoming quite the large party now, and she supposed Mr. Darcy might not have wished that.

However, it was his own fault, was it not?

Oh, certainly, there was something to this business of his being so distracted by his wanting her that he could not think properly—certainly, that made her feel unsteady, made her sigh—but she still found herself furious with him.

He didn't respect her, that was the problem.

If he respected her, he would share his secrets. He would not prioritize his business over her. He would not delegate tasks to her and then insult her ability to perform them to his liking when he had not properly explained how to fulfill them.

Feeling peevish, she wrote out one more invitation, to her uncle and aunt. Her uncle was her mother's brother. He worked in trade, and Elizabeth knew that someone like Mr. Darcy would not usually associate with them. She did not care. She hoped it made him angry.

Mr. Darcy appeared at dinner, but Georgiana was not there, because she said she was feeling poorly. Miss Younge was in attendance, but quiet as always.

Elizabeth found the meal agitating. Every time she attempted to engage Mr. Darcy in conversation, it went badly.

She would mention something trifling, complimenting the food or remarking on the weather, and then she would look at him, and he would be staring at her with a most unsettling expression on his face, as if he were ravenous.

But not for whatever was on his plate. Indeed, he did not seem to be eating. He seemed to only wish to drink her in.

The heat of his gaze made it impossible for her to think or to speak.

If Miss Younge noticed that they were having an aborted attempt at dinner conversation, she didn't let on. She conducted this meal the same as every other one, by silently eating and gazing off as if lost in thought.

Finally, the dreadful exercise was over, and Elizabeth was excused. In a normal household, there would be some after-dinner gathering in the sitting room. There might be discussion or playing

or singing. Elizabeth might read or do some embroidery.

But in the Darcy household, everyone went their own way.

Elizabeth went back to the library as if she expected some more interesting books to have appeared there, but of course none had. Sighing, she wondered if she could stomach more ancient plays, perhaps some of the comedies. There was a collection containing the works of Aristophanes. She remembered some of that to be quite diverting. Hesitantly, she slid the volume out from the shelf.

"I wonder if you could give me an explanation."

She was so startled that she dropped the book. Almost on her toe. One inch closer and she would have injured herself.

Mr. Darcy was in the doorway to the library. "Pardon me. I should have knocked or announced myself or something of that manner. My deepest apologies for frightening you."

"I'm not frightened," she said, snatching up the book. She started for the doorway, determined to push past him and go to her room.

"Stay where you are, if you please." He held up a hand.

She stopped moving, lifting her chin. "Why?"

"I... it seems as if it is difficult to, er, talk to you without it becoming... touching." He cleared his throat. His face reddened.

She blushed too, and things inside her seemed to both contract and release at the same time. Her breath grew a bit shallow. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I want an explanation," he said.

"Oh, yes, that is what you said when you came in. For what?"

"For why you don't like me," he said.

She let out a disbelieving noise.

"I don't feel as if I've treated you badly, madam. Quite the opposite, in fact. And we seem to be... rather well suited romantically."

She snorted.

"You disagree?"

"You are so very full of your opinion of yourself, aren't you?" she snapped.

He smiled wryly. "You seem determined to *willfully* misunderstand me."

"And you seem determined that there is no possible world in which Mr. Darcy of Pemberley could be seen as anything other than a god amongst men."

Now he barked out a laugh. "Oh, how is that fair? Truly, madam,

when have I done anything to deserve this ire? You know what I think it is?"

"I imagine you're going to tell me whether it is I want to hear it or not, aren't you?"

"I think you're flustered because of the... reaction between us."

"There's no reaction." Her voice was barely audible.

"Oh, come now, you can't deny it. I know you feel it. I have never been so drawn to a woman. When I touch you it's... explosive. And I know you are not faking those sounds that I wrench from your lips when I am with you."

"How do you know that? Perhaps I am only pretending, in order to... manipulate you."

"If so, I wouldn't think it would serve your purpose to admit it."

She felt foolish and angry and that ache within her was opening up, like a chasm that could only be filled when she was in his arms.

"You don't like it, because it makes you feel as if you've lost all power over yourself," he said quietly. "I understand, because it is like that for me too. But it is not my fault. I am not... that is, I'm not doing in on purpose. And it is lovely, is it not? So, if that could go so smoothly between us, why could not everything go so smoothly?"

She couldn't look at him.

"You said to me that you wished to have a happy marriage, one built on respect and love, and I feel as though we could have—"

"You don't respect me," she said. "You treat me as poorly as you treat your sister."

"What are you talking about?" He stiffened. "You know nothing of my sister."

"Yes, and why is that?" she said. "Because you will *tell* me nothing."

"I cannot simply tell you everything, just like that."

"Why not?" she said. "I am your wife. You say you want things to go smoothly between us. Tell me everything, then."

He sighed.

"I'm going to go read," she said, snatching up her book, clutching it to her chest, and starting to stride across the room.

He moved to intercept her.

She kept moving.

He put out his hands, catching her by the shoulders, holding her at arms' length.

The sensation of his hands on her, even through her dress, it was abominable in the most arresting of ways. She choked.

His voice was quiet. "Ask me something else. Anything else. Not about Georgiana."

She sifted through her brain for something to ask, something to help her piece together all the strangeness in her new home. But being close to him made it hard for her to think, and she ended up blurting out the first thing that came to her mind, "Did Miss Younge have any references?"

He let go of her. "Why would you ask me that?"

"Answer the question, Mr. Darcy." She drew herself up. "You won't tell me anything."

"Yes, she had references. You can't think I would hire someone without references, can you?"

"Why did you hire her? Have you ever thought that she might want to do your family harm?"

"Why are you saying this?"

This was not working. She was telling him what she knew, and he was not revealing anything to her. "Never mind."

"That was about Georgiana, anyway," said Mr. Darcy. "Why can't you leave it alone?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "I've been brought to a place with my husband, who is only interested in me if I'm not wearing clothes, and the rest of the time, I must spend with the silent Miss Younge and the peevish Miss Darcy—"

"Don't insult my sister," he said in a low voice.

"And there are a great many things that are being kept from me, but I suppose I shall do nothing except lie around in my bed wearing only my shift, unbuttoned so that you'll have easy access whenever you can fit bedding me into your busy schedule." Her voice had been steadily rising, and now it seemed so loud as to have echoed off the spine of every book in the library.

Lord, everyone in the house must have heard her. She was mortified.

His jaw twitched.

"Excuse me, Mr. Darcy," she murmured, ducking out of his arms and stepping to the side.

He let his hands drop.

She walked out of the library.

He didn't stop her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She didn't think he would come to her bed that night, but he did, almost as if he couldn't help himself. It was late again, after she had already been asleep, and there weren't words exchanged between them, only kisses and caresses. He was slow this time, explorative, spending deliciously excruciating eternities touching her with his fingers, kissing her skin in all manner of shocking places.

And when they were joined, face to face, one of her hands fluttered against his jaw, and he kissed her eyebrow.

"Forgive me," he breathed.

She thought that was what he said, anyway.

"Yes," she gasped. "Yes." But what exactly she was agreeing to, she didn't know. It seemed that she would say yes to everything in that moment, that everything was glorious.

After it was over, they fell asleep with their limbs entwined, their bare skin pressed close, and she thought that being close to him like this was too sweet for the world, that she wouldn't be able to bear how much she liked it.

She woke up to the cool, blue light of near dawn.

He was sitting on the bed, stretching, completely nude, and she had never really seen his body before. She blinked away sleep to drink him in. He was so pleasing. She liked the way his back rippled as he yawned. She liked his arms and his chest and his shoulders. She sat up, as if unable to stop herself, and ran a finger down his spine.

He turned to her, and he gave her a smile that she realized he only smiled at her.

She felt as if she might be melting, like ice slipping off her boots near a blazing fire in the winter.

"I'm sorry I woke you, my darling." His voice was deep, and it seemed to warm her too.

"I'm not," she murmured. "I hate waking and not having you with me."

"Truly?" he whispered, and there was such a look on his face, so much vulnerability there.

She smoothed her hand over his cheekbone and jaw. He had a prickly bit of growth there. She liked it, and she smiled.

"I didn't think you'd wish to wake up in the arms of a man you dislike," he said.

"And yet, you thought I'd welcome you between my thighs?" she said archly.

"Obviously, you do," he said.

"But you see the contradiction?"

"You don't really dislike me," he murmured. He was crawling back up to her.

She pulled aside the covers and drew them over them both as she pressed her body against his. "I loathe you, Mr. Darcy," she whispered, offering him her lips.

He claimed them. "Liar."

* * *

When Elizabeth saw her aunt and uncle arriving for the dinner party, her stomach dropped. She had almost forgotten about inviting them, even though she had received her aunt's response to the invitation days ago.

She wouldn't say that things were necessarily better between her and Mr. Darcy, because he was still stubbornly refusing to tell her anything and he was also spending the better part of his days holed in his study or out in town, attending to whatever this business of his was.

But there was an increasing tenderness to their lovemaking, and she had woken up in his arms every morning for the past five days.

She did not loathe him.

No, she was feeling gentler feelings towards this husband of hers, and that tether that she had felt between them grew stronger and stronger with each passing day. They had conversations now at dinner. Never about anything truly important, of course. But she liked to listen to him talk, even about how much he fancied green beans, and he seemed to be equally as fascinated with her opinion of roast chicken.

She supposed she was what might be termed lovesick.

Did she love him?

She must. She thought of him nearly constantly. She felt better when he was close by. She could not but be aware of his every movement when they were in the same room. He made her blush, and he made her smile, and she thought kissing him was the most wondrous thing in the world.

And yet, even if she did not loathe him, she was still frustrated. She wanted to understand all the things he was keeping from her, and she could see that he wasn't the least bit willing to speak of it to her.

Now, this dinner party.

She was not sure what to make of it. Knowing what she did about Mr. Wickham and Miss Younge, she thought that Mr. Darcy had been forced into giving the dinner for Mr. Wickham.

Mr. Wickham must know some horrible secret, something that Mr. Darcy didn't want anyone to know. He was hanging that threat over Mr. Darcy's head. So, this dinner, it was truly anything but pleasant, and she had gone and made it worse by inviting her aunt and uncle without giving Mr. Darcy any prior knowledge of such a thing.

She had wanted to make him angry when she did it, but now she felt as if she had been petty when she did such a thing.

Oh, what was wrong with her?

Jane would never have done such a thing. Jane would likely not even be so worried about whatever it was that Mr. Darcy was keeping from her. She could just imagine Jane, saying, *Well, I'm sure when he thinks it's the right time, he shall reveal everything to me. I shall simply be patient.*

Oh, why couldn't she be like Jane?

Unfortunately, she was not.

She greeted her aunt and uncle warmly and introduced them to Mr. Darcy. To his credit, he did not seem shocked or surprised by their presence at all. He shook her uncle's hand. "So wonderful to meet a member of my wife's family. It's good that you could come."

"Of course," said Mr. Gardiner.

"It is not so far away," said Mrs. Gardiner.

"No?" said Mr. Darcy, looking at Elizabeth.

She smiled at him, forcing herself not to cringe. "My aunt and uncle live on Gracechurch Street."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Darcy, showing no hint of disdain for the part of town. "Well, that isn't so very far away at all. We must be sure to

spend more time together, then. Perhaps we can all go to a play at some time in the near future.”

“That would be delightful,” said her aunt, beaming.

Later, as they were going in to dinner, her aunt gave her a look. “I had heard he was disagreeable.”

“No,” said Elizabeth, sighing. She was more in love with him now than ever. “He is not.” Well, this wasn’t strictly the case. He had many disagreeable aspects to himself. But just then, she could not remember any of them.

Mr. Wickham didn’t seem pleased that half of the dinner party were his old schoolmates and their wives, but Elizabeth knew that it was all that could have made sense to Mrs. Gibbs when Elizabeth had proposed the dinner party to her. She must have thought Mr. Darcy wished to reminisce about old times.

But the knowledge of Mr. Wickham’s humble origins were spoken of on numerous occasions, and Elizabeth could see that Mr. Wickham—though he remained polite and complimentary—was furious.

Darcy noted it, too, and he began to steer his old school friends away from the rest of the party, engaging them in conversation so that Wickham could mingle with the others at the party.

But when the evening was over, Wickham lingered after everyone else had gone. It was quite late by then, and everyone had been drinking, Wickham included.

He and Darcy went into Darcy’s study, and they were gone a long time.

Elizabeth would have put her ear to the door, but Bess came through the hall, yawning, and Elizabeth could see that the maid would like to undress Elizabeth and retire for the night, so she left Darcy to Wickham and went to bed.

Mr. Darcy came to bed sometime later. His breath tasted of whiskey when he kissed her, and there was something desperate about his hands on her skin.

“I suppose you’re not going to tell me what that was about,” she said.

“Not right now,” he groaned. “I want to lose myself in you. Can’t I just do that, please? No talking.”

“When do we ever talk?” she said.

“We talk.” He was pressing into her thigh, and she could feel how much he wanted her.

“Not about anything important. Not about why you would throw a dinner party for that horrible man,” she said.

“You think he’s horrible?” His mouth claimed hers. There was something harsh about his kiss.

“Of course,” she said.

“You’re a good judge of character,” he said, dragging his hands over her waist, his fingers digging into her flesh. “Let’s stop talking about him. Please?”

It was the second time he’d pleaded with her.

She let the matter drop, as much because he was distracting her with his caresses as because of wanting to let him have his way. He grunted and sighed, moving against her as if he could gather up all his troubles and expel them somehow, as if whatever he did with her could take it all away. He did seem to lose himself in her.

When it was done, he seemed to be relieved. He kissed her and cupped her curves sleepily as he drifted off.

But she was still awake, staring at the ceiling, determined more than ever to find out the truth about Mr. Wickham.

* * *

“So, did we talk about your aunt and uncle coming?” Mr. Darcy was saying. His voice was muffled because he had buried her face in her hair.

It was late morning. They had slept late. Elizabeth had a bit of a headache from too much drink the night before. She was not going to open her eyes, she had decided. And she was going to spend the whole day in bed. “Oh, I’m sorry about that. I did that in a wave of frustration. I was trying to anger you, because you had angered me. It was childish in retrospect. You were lovely to them. I have to thank you that.”

“Why would it anger me that your family was here?”

“Well, they are hardly the sort of people you’d associate with,” she said.

“Come now, you are my wife. They are your family. I could not be that much of a snob. Is this what you truly think of me?” His voice was less muffled. He must have lifted his head.

She had still not opened her eyes. “Perhaps I was a bit harsh in my judgment of you.”

“Oh, indeed?” He sounded rather smug.

“Only a bit,” she protested, her eyes still closed. She burrowed into her pillow.

"See, I knew you didn't hate me, after all." Even more smug.

She chuckled

"I believe you like me very much," he pronounced.

She scoffed. "I'm liking you less with every word you are speaking."

"You worship me," he said. "You daydream about my kisses when I'm not around."

"Which is most of the time," she said pointedly.

"You would be quite lost without me. You can't imagine your life if you had not married me—"

"I think you're going a bit far," she said, but she was smiling.

"Are you ever going to open your eyes?"

"Never," she said. "I think I shall stay in bed all day today."

"Hmm, that might be a brilliant thought," he said, nuzzling her neck. His hands moved under the covers.

She giggled.

"Did I tickle you?" he said in a soft voice.

"No."

"Do you want me to?"

"Fitzwilliam."

"If I tickle you, will you open your eyes?"

"I take it all back." She stretched, arching her back and pressing her body into his. "I don't like you, after all."

He made a low noise in the back of his throat at the way she was squirming against him. "Stop that," he managed.

"Do you object? I thought we were spending the whole day in bed."

"No, no, I have business." He sounded regretful.

"You always have business." She opened her eyes. She turned to look at him, sticking out her lower lip.

He touched it with his forefinger, smiling his special smile for her. "Some other day, I will spend it all in bed with you, my darling. I can't imagine a better day, in fact."

She scowled at him.

He kissed her forehead. "I really need to get up. It's so late."

He left her there in bed, alone.

She seethed into her pillow.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

By the time Elizabeth made it downstairs, it was nearly time for luncheon. Miss Younge was at the front door. She looked up at Elizabeth.

“Good morning, Mrs. Darcy,” she said carelessly.

“Good morning,” said Elizabeth. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes, it’s my day to myself,” said Miss Younge. “I’ll likely not be back for dinner. Mrs. Gibbs is with Georgiana. If you looked in on her, I’m sure she’d appreciate it.”

Elizabeth doubted that. In fact, as she had become closer to Mr. Darcy, his sister seemed to pull away even more, retreating into herself, only making sullen comments when Mr. Darcy tried to draw her out of his shell.

She could see how much it wounded her husband. Whatever the case with the man, he cared about his sister, and he was devastated by whatever hurt had befallen Georgiana.

Elizabeth only wished she knew what it was.

Miss Younge raised a hand and waved. “Well, farewell. I most likely won’t see you until breakfast tomorrow.”

“Goodbye,” said Elizabeth.

Miss Younge slipped out the door.

On impulse, Elizabeth seized her pelisse from where it hung near the door and went after her.

She waited, the door open only a crack, as she watched Miss Younge walk down the street, and then Elizabeth eased out of the door as well. She had not yet even had anything to eat, and her head was still faintly pulsing from her overindulgence in drink the night before.

But she had to see where it was that Miss Younge was going.

Maybe, if she found something out today, she’d share what she knew with Mr. Darcy. Maybe if he knew that she’d found out things

he didn't know, he'd be willing to share some of his secrets as well. Whatever the case, she needed to know.

Elizabeth assumed that, since Miss Younge was on foot, the distance she was walking must not be too great, but she found herself rather fatigued as she walked on and on, always keeping far enough back that Miss Younge would not see her, but near enough that she did not lose sight of the governess.

Fortunately, Elizabeth was quite used to walking. Though she had been in London and cooped up indoors since her marriage, her body was still honed from much exercised out of doors in her home in Hertfordshire. The fatigue she felt likely stemmed from the fact she had not eaten nor drunk anything that morning. However, her headache seemed to ease, and Elizabeth filed this bit of knowledge away in her mind, for she had heard that exercise could be a good remedy for the effects of too much strong drink the night before, but had never wished to put it to the test when lying on the couch and reading seemed such a more appealing way to wile away a day.

They moved through the city, covering blocks and blocks, until they came to a neighborhood that was not nearly as respectable as Mr. Darcy's had been. However, the houses here were as neat and proper as could be, if a bit less ostentatious and elaborate.

Miss Younge went to one of the houses and straightaway knocked at the door. It was opened by a maid and Miss Younge went in.

Elizabeth, who was across the street, did not now know what to do.

Well, where did I think she was going? Elizabeth wondered. Did I think she was going to go and meet Mr. Wickham in some seedy tavern somewhere? That I could sit a few tables beyond them in the shadows and listen to all the things that they said?

She despaired. Despite the remedy for her pounding head, it seemed this entire excursion had been in vain.

She had kept close track of where she had walked, which streets they had taken, and she was confident that she could make her way back to her own house, but she lingered, unwilling to give up hope that she might discover something.

Behind her, she heard the noise of a door opening, but she paid it no mind, still scrutinizing the house in which Miss Younge had disappeared. Who might Miss Younge be visiting? Could it be that Mr. Wickham lived in this house? She wished she knew more of Mr. Wickham. She knew only that he and Mr. Darcy were boyhood

chums, that he was blackmailing Mr. Darcy—well, she guessed this, but it seemed likely—and that Mr. Darcy had wished to introduce him to people Mr. Wickham didn't know at the dinner party. Likely, that had been Mr. Wickham's wish. Likely, he—

"Pardon me, mum?" The voice was right at her shoulder.

She turned, startled. "Yes?"

It was a servant, standing just in front of the steps to the house she was standing in front of. "Are you planning to come inside? Have you come to call?"

"What?" said Elizabeth. "No, I am simply standing here."

"Ah," said the servant, his tone clear that he found this to be a nonsensical answer.

She sighed. "My apologies. I shall be on my way."

"Are you lost?" said the servant.

"I am not," she said. "But while I have you here, perhaps you can answer me this." She pointed. "That house there, across the street?"

The servant nodded, repeating its number to her.

"The very house," said Elizabeth. "Do you know who lives there?"

"Oh, indeed, everyone knows," said the servant. "It was quite the talk of the street when she moved in. It was said she would drag us all down with her ignominy. But she has kept to herself, in fact. And no one comes to see her. I suppose she is too old to entertain men anymore."

"What?" said Elizabeth. "What are you talking about?"

"Miss Mary Quinne," said the servant. "The infamous courtesan."

"Mary," murmured Elizabeth. The note, in the book that Miss Younge had, the sight of Miss Younge and Georgiana together in profile. Her breath caught in her throat.

Heavens!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mr. Darcy teased his wife often about how much she liked him, but his motivations in saying such things were borne out of anxiety. He judged her responses often, turning them over and over in his mind when he was alone, trying to determine what her true feelings were.

And what he had determined was that she did not like him.

It was a stunning bit of fortune that anything was going well between them at all. Mr. Darcy had not expected it to. He was not what one might term experienced in the bedroom. He had no experience, truly, except an aborted attempt with a woman in a brothel once. Aborted because he had not been able to complete the act, too mortified was he in his youth and idiocy.

What was more, he had been in trepidation over the act with his new wife, because of things he had heard. Once, one of his friends from school, who had married young, a love match with a girl he'd pursued in a violent passion, had admitted to Darcy, when they were both in their cups, that bedding his new wife was a disaster. That he seemed only to cause her displeasure. That he could not understand a thing about how her body worked. That they both dreaded it and had left off seeing each other at night at all. That they rarely touched each other for any reason anymore.

His friend had despaired over it all not so much out of the loss of his carnal activities but because of the wedge it had driven between him and his wife. They had adored each other before the marriage. He had been breathless to be in her company, and she to be in his. Now, his friend said, quite drunk, everything was in ruin.

This had stuck with Mr. Darcy, rattling about in his head, and he'd had such concern over it, that he'd begun seeking out what information he could about such things, in books, because it seemed the only avenue available to him. He could not bear the idea of

visiting some woman now, at his age, admitting he hadn't the first idea what he was doing.

The books were ridiculous. There was no such thing as a manual of instructions. He had to make do with books written to inflame, which seemed to be more fantasy than reality. He could not believe that Fanny Hill became so willing and lustful at such little exposure to happenstance voyeurism, for instance, and yet, there was information to be gleaned.

And somehow... somehow, he had managed not to make an utter mess of it all with Elizabeth.

But that was the only thing that seemed to be working between them, and Mr. Darcy had realized that he had the opposite problem than his old school friend. While his friend had a marriage in which everything worked except the activity between the sheets, the bedroom activity was the only thing that was going well in his own marriage. And he was not so foolish as to think that because he managed to please his wife that she had fallen for him.

She didn't like him.

She had not liked him since the moment she laid eyes on him, and nothing about the way she reacted to him now made him think she had changed her mind.

And until she did, he could not trust her.

Georgiana had been through too much already. Unless he was certain of Elizabeth, he would not tell her the dark secrets of the Darcy family.

The problem was that he could not go about earning her trust and making amends to her until he settled this business, which involved Georgiana's past. He must finish what he started, and then he could concentrate on making his marriage strong.

And just then, Darcy should be attending to that business instead of thinking about his wife, wondering about her attentions. He was in his study, sitting at his desk, a piece of paper spread out in front of him. He needed to be writing a letter, but he was having trouble finding the words.

Elizabeth tormented him, because he wished her to like him. He wished her to love him. He had somehow fallen for her entirely, and he wasn't sure when or how it had happened. He had not thought love would be this way, like falling into dark, murky water. He had always thought love took time, something that grew with mutual respect, built a stone at a time. But in his case, love had

come over him all at once, and with each passing day, he found himself mired further in it, as if his feet had been stuck in the mud at the bottom of a deep well and as he struggled, he only got himself stuck further. He wondered if he would drown.

Abruptly, the door to his study opened.

It was Elizabeth. She was unbuttoning her pelisse, and her cheeks were red, as if she'd been outdoors. Strands of her hair were framing her face, and he was reminded of the first time he'd kissed her, in the field, how she had been the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

He was on his feet, and he wanted her, and this made him angry. "What are you doing in here? And where have you been? Did you leave the house without my permission?"

"You do not own me, Mr. Darcy," she retorted, shrugging out of her pelisse. "I don't need to ask your permission to go on a walk."

"Walking alone in London is far different than walking alone in the country," he said. "You have no idea of the dangers—"

"Miss Younge is your sister."

Mr. Darcy blinked.

"Did you know this?" said Elizabeth.

His brain contorted, several times. No, she had said what he thought she had said. He licked his lips, furrowing his brow.

"Perhaps you should sit down," said Elizabeth. She looked toward the door. "I should have gone to her room to get the book. I'll go and do that. You wait here. I shall return in—"

"What do you mean, my sister?"

"A by-blow." She turned back to him. "With a courtesan. Miss Younge's mother. Miss Younge is visiting her even now. I followed her, and she went to the house of a courtesan with the name of Mary. Earlier, I found a gift your father gave to a woman named Mary amongst Miss Younge's things. I can think of no other explanation that makes as much sense as this one."

Mr. Darcy did sit down, reeling. He spoke, more to himself than to his wife. "I did hire Miss Younge on the orders of my father. His papers, when he died, indicated that he wished for Miss Younge to be employed as a companion for Georgiana. He wanted Miss Younge taken care of."

"Well, that proves it, then," said Elizabeth. "What I don't understand is why she is working with Mr. Wickham."

"What?" Darcy shot to his feet again.

"I saw them together one night," said Elizabeth. "In this house. Wickham spoke about sharing money that you were giving him with her. So, I deduced that Wickham was blackmailing you, and Miss Younge must be assisting him in some way. But you refuse to tell me anything. So, now that I have told you something you did not know, will you share your secrets with me?"

Darcy only gaped at her. He was far too confused and surprised to deal with that request. He could not pull himself together at all. He came out from behind his desk. "Let's see this gift you found amongst Miss Younge's things, then."

"It's a book," said Elizabeth. "There is a message written in the front, to Mary from your father."

"We'll go there," he said, striding across the room and opening the door. "I shall see it for myself." He wanted to move, as if walking would make his brain work better.

He led the way, and the two of them tore up the steps to Miss Younge's bedroom.

Elizabeth went straightaway to the trunk and retrieved the book.

Darcy held it, tracing his father's handwriting, swallowing hard.

"It must be... difficult to hear of such a thing," came his wife's voice, quiet. "I shouldn't have blurted it out in such a way. I should have been more thoughtful. My apologies."

He looked up at her. He was quiet for a moment and then his gaze fell back to the book. "No, it's all right. I do not harbor a perfect picture of my father's past. I have not been able to do so, not when I have taken over all his business affairs and his properties. And besides, it is hardly rare for men to be unfaithful to their wives."

Nothing from her.

He glanced at her.

Her face had settled into a stony expression.

"Not that *I* would... why, I can't imagine ever finding another woman... you are so very, very..." He could not seem to finish a sentence. He licked his lips. "You know, you are the only woman I have ever..." But he could not see this one to its ending either.

Her eyes widened. "Ever?" she whispered. "But you are so... skilled."

And now, he could feel his face reddening. He turned back to the book, clearing his throat. "There is no reason for my father to have concealed Miss Younge's existence from me."

“He must have been ashamed,” said Elizabeth.

A long pause as he thought about it. Ashamed? No, that was not Jonathan Darcy’s way. But he had not wished to cause undue suffering to those he cared about. “Perhaps he thought that my mother would survive him when he made up his will. Perhaps he thought the truth would hurt her. He couldn’t have known they’d both die at the same time, of the same sickness.” He shut the book. He sucked in a breath.

“There is... a resemblance,” said Elizabeth. “Perhaps you’ll notice it now. Miss Younge and Georgiana are quite clearly sisters.”

“Lord,” muttered Darcy. “If she’s working with Mr. Wickham, she’s angry. Perhaps she thinks that she was owed something more than what she received from the family. I must say that my father was not always so intelligent about the way he bestowed his money on young people. Mr. Wickham, for instance, my father groomed him to be a parson in Derbyshire, but anyone who spent two minutes with Wickham would know he was not meant for the church. My father paid for his schooling, treated him quite well. Wickham used all of my father’s charity only to scheme and to do underhanded things. I cannot think he is a good influence on her.”

“Mr. Darcy, what does Mr. Wickham hold over you? Is it something to do with Georgiana? What was the bad time she had? What happened?”

Darcy gazed at her. He felt a pressure to let it all out, to explain it all to her. But he fought that.

She doesn’t like me.

“Why have you been digging into this, Mrs. Darcy?” he said, gazing at her sternly.

“Well, I have no way of knowing anything since you won’t *talk* to me.”

“And what do you intend to do with this knowledge you have uncovered?” he said.

She narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I know that you don’t hold me in high esteem,” he said. “Now, you have a weapon against me.”

“Mr. Darcy, it is not that way.” She sighed. “Besides, you are always on about how much I do, in fact, like you.”

“When we are...” He looked away, his face heating up again. “That is a jest, as we both know.”

“A jest?”

“Yes, I am but teasing you. It is easier to be around you when...”

“When we aren’t dressed?” She glared at him.

He swallowed. He put the book back in Miss Younge’s trunk. “Let us not discuss this here,” he murmured.

“No one is here,” she said. “No one is listening. Tell me about Georgiana. Tell me about Mr. Wickham.”

“I can’t,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t trust you, not when you despise me.”

“I don’t despise you.” But she uttered it in such a way that it sounded as if she very much *did* despise him.

He rubbed his forehead. “I’m sorry. I truly am. When I get this business squared away, I’ll have more time for you. We can properly get to know each other. I will do what I can to earn your forgiveness for my behavior now. But I simply don’t have the time —”

“So, until then, you’ll keep me entirely unwitting and just come to me whenever you want the pleasure of my body?”

His lips parted. “I did not think you felt so... used.”

“Don’t come to my bedchamber again,” she said. “You will not be welcome.” She turned on her heel and stalked out of the room.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was nearly 9:00 by the time that Miss Younge returned home, which was not atypical of her days off, if Mr. Darcy remembered clearly. He had the butler bring her directly to his study.

He beckoned her inside and shut the door behind her. "It's a shame," he said. "I wish our father had shared the truth with me about you. I think this all could have gone differently between us."

She stiffened, giving him a frightened look.

"What are your intentions toward this family?" he said, eyeing her.

"I... don't know what you mean," she said.

"I understand you are meeting with Mr. Wickham," said Mr. Darcy. "You were seen talking to him in this very house."

Miss Younge paled.

"Mr. Wickham wishes me nothing but ill," said Mr. Darcy. "He has it in his head that he is owed something from me, why that is, I don't know, when I have already given him so much. I suppose you feel owed as well, and with a much better reason, as my father is responsible for your existence. He seemed to wish that you would be looked after, even when he was no longer alive to oversee it. If I had known you were my sister, I would have behaved differently. What is it, Miss Younge? Are your wages not sufficient? Do you feel slighted to be merely a governess? What is your grievance against me and mine?"

"He abandoned us," murmured Miss Younge. "When I was a little girl, I remember how my father would come and spend days with us. It was my favorite time, when he was there. He would sit me on his lap and tell me stories. Did he do the same with you?"

Mr. Darcy nodded slowly.

"But then his visits grew sparser, more time passed in between when he would see us, and eventually, he stopped coming at all. I

suppose he grew tired of us. He had you and your sister and your mother, after all. What man needs two families?"

"I can't speak to the things my father did," said Mr. Darcy. "I am sure he committed his share of sins. What man doesn't? What I can say, Miss Younge, is that he is dead. And any revenge you wish to have upon him can only come to naught. I am sorry for your suffering. Indeed, I am sorry for my father, inasmuch as I can be. I am not my father, however."

She would not meet his gaze.

"Regardless of all that," he said, sighing, "this arrangement cannot continue. You will pack your things and you will be gone from this house by tomorrow evening."

Miss Younge's eyes widened. "You can't do that. Why, I was present in Ramsgate when Georgiana—"

"I am well aware of what you witnessed," said Mr. Darcy. "And since it was my father's wish to take care of you, I am willing to settle on an allowance to be paid to you. But your services here will no longer be necessary. I do not need your prying eyes within my household any longer, looking for more weaknesses, more chinks in the Darcy family armor. You will leave."

Miss Younge nodded, her expression cold. "Let us discuss the amount of this allowance, then."

Darcy sighed, but he gestured toward the chairs in front of his desk. "Yes, of course. Have a seat, then, Miss Younge."

* * *

Elizabeth paced in her bedroom. She had told Mr. Darcy not to come to her that night, but she hadn't expected he would listen to her. He had shown no regard for her whatsoever before, after all, appearing in the middle of the night and waking her to have his way with her.

Lately, he had been coming earlier, however. Lately, she had known about when to expect him.

But that time had come and gone and he had not so much as knocked on her door.

She heard a noise in the hallway, someone rushing past her door, and she could not help but go and open the door a crack to see.

But it was only Miss Younge, flouncing up the stairs in a bit of a huff.

She stepped out into the hallway and there was Mr. Darcy, coming up the stairs behind Miss Younge. He looked weary and

harried. His gaze settled onto her, and they shared a long look, a look full of unspeakable things, things that crawled into her body and woke her in the most unsettling of ways. Her breath grew a bit labored.

He stopped at the top of the steps, a full six feet away from her. His voice was gravelly. "I have told Miss Younge to pack her bags. She will be gone on the morrow."

"Oh," said Elizabeth, looking after the woman. Why had she not realized this would likely be the consequence of her telling what she knew to Mr. Darcy? She turned back to him. "I suppose that is for the best. After all, you cannot have a woman under your roof who is actively working against you."

"No," he said, his mouth twisting. "I cannot."

She lifted her chin. "You're not implying that *I* am working against you."

He didn't say anything.

She took a step toward him. "I am your *wife*. How would it profit me to harm you? Would it not harm me as well?"

"You resent me," he said. "You didn't wish to marry me. You agreed to all of this against your will."

"Yes, but..." She swallowed. "But now, things are different. It's you who are being ridiculously stubborn. You ought to trust me."

"Why?"

"Because..." Her lips parted, and she thought of him divested of his jacket and his cravat and his waistcoat. She thought of the way his skin felt under her fingertips. Her body reacted violently, and she wavered on her feet. She wanted him, and that made her angry.

"Regretting barring me from your bedchamber, wife?" He arched an eyebrow. His voice had grown even more gravelly. It was tattered.

The sound of it made her insides leap, as if she'd gone over a hill too fast in a carriage. She sucked in a shuddering breath. "Not at all," she managed, and she flung herself back into her room, slamming the door behind her.

* * *

Days passed, and they were long days, but the nights were longer.

Mr. Darcy felt his temper begin to fray, as each endless night unraveled him further.

Georgiana was not pleased at the loss of Miss Younge, even

though she had not liked Miss Younge so far as Darcy could tell. Georgiana was displeased, however, because Miss Younge knew everything about what had happened to her, and Georgiana fretted over this.

She wrung out her hands, murmuring that Miss Younge would only have to tell one person, and the news could spread all over London in a matter of days. "Everyone will know, Fitz," she said, her eyes wide and horrified.

"No, I am paying her well for her silence," he assured her.

But she wasn't reassured. She cried again, and it was as if it had happened to her fresh, all over again. He still remembered carrying her out of the carriage when she'd arrived from Ramsgate, how frail she'd seemed. Wickham's voice had been grave when he spoke of all the blood, but his eyes had been bright and excited. He knew what he held over Darcy.

The fact that Darcy hadn't been there for his sister, that he had to find out of it from that villain... It still rankled. He wished he could have done more for her then. He wanted to do more now.

He wanted to pull her into his arms, but he was afraid she would not welcome his touch. He well remembered the way she had pushed him away on many occasions in the past.

In the end, he only took her hand, and she let him squeeze her fingers until the tears passed.

When he left her room, he went to his study to throw himself into finding some way to determine what had happened to his poor sister, to bring about some measure of justice. But he could not concentrate, because he found himself plagued with memories of Elizabeth's skin.

He thought he must be the most despicable man that had ever lived. How could he be so obsessed with his wife during a time like this? All he should be thinking about was Georgiana.

He was disgusted with himself.

Shouldn't he have grown bored with Elizabeth by now? Hadn't he had her enough times? Why was it that every time he touched the woman, he only grew more obsessed?

Right then, he didn't feel as if he loved her, only that he was somehow enslaved to her, like a man caught in a magic spell.

He prowled around the house, snapping at anyone who spoke to him, and spent whatever time he could in his study. He forewent his meals, and he only saw Elizabeth a handful of times, in passing

in the hallway now and again.

Once or twice, in the night, he did go to her door, but he never went in.

He was resolved not to go near her, because a wretched possibility had occurred to him.

He had assumed that his wife was as pleased by their lovemaking as he was. Hadn't he felt her body twitching its pleasure against his fingers more than once? Hadn't he wrung the breathy gasps from her lips? Hadn't she kissed him like a woman possessed?

But... he knew nothing of women. Lord, he had only ever bedded his wife, after all, *truly* bedded, that was, not that travesty of his youth. So, perhaps she was feigning it all. Perhaps she was only pretending. She had even said it to him at one point, but he had dismissed it then. Now, however... he wondered. Was there any way to know?

She did seem to be in a poor temper as well, but maybe that was only because she was so angry as to have been forced into this marriage.

No, there was only one way to be sure of her.

If she broke first, if she came to him and wanted him, then he'd know that she sincerely enjoyed him as much as he enjoyed her. So, he must be strong and keep himself from her, as much as he felt it was robbing him of his sanity. Otherwise, he would never know the truth of it.

He poured himself into finding out what he could about Georgiana, speaking to every single one of the men that Mr. Denny had told him about. Most knew nothing. They told him that Mr. Wickham had been alone on the occasion with two of the men, the Marquess of Midvale and his friend Lord Whitby, both of whom were young, rich men of the ton. Of them, Darcy was more likely to suspect the marquess, whose father, the Duke of Bellingshire, had the estate near Pemberley. It made sense.

When Darcy thought of the marquess, he imagined wringing the boy's neck, squeezing and squeezing while the marquess's face turned various shades of purple.

But he had to be sure, of course.

He could not entice the marquess to see him, which only served to cement his belief that he was the one, but Whitby had responded to his letter, promising to call upon Darcy. His willingness to come seemed to point to the idea that he was not responsible or that he

was the most wretched sort of man, who truly had no care whatsoever for the pain he wrought. Whatever the case, Darcy hoped to get some information from him.

If he could not, he was not sure what he would do.

One night, he stayed late in his study, drinking too much brandy, and when he staggered to his room, he found that Elizabeth was waiting for him. She was reading a book in his bedroom, sitting at the chair at his writing desk.

She got to her feet when he entered. She was dressed, but her dress was white, as was the style these days, and the fabric seemed too thin. He was sure he could see the glow of her skin through it. He was far too drunk to resist her right now.

But maybe that was why she'd come. Maybe she couldn't stand their being apart either. Maybe she would submit to him, and then he would know that she wanted him, and then...

"It's late," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"What have you been doing so late?"

His jaw twitched.

"Don't be so difficult," she said, clenching her hands into fists. "Only tell me, and then this ridiculousness can end."

He wasn't sure that keeping the secret *wasn't* ridiculous at this point, but maybe that was the drink going to work in his head. It would loosen his tongue, wouldn't it?

She gazed at him, her lips parted. She reached up and began to absently fumble with the button at the top of her dress.

It drew his eyes to her bosom, to her skin, her curving swells. His body was on fire. "Stop that," he said in a grating voice.

"What?" She was all innocence.

Was she playing at that?

He stalked over to her, seizing her hand, stopping her movement. It meant that his hand grazed her skin, her *soft* skin. He let out a noise, something unbridled and tormented.

"I'm sorry," she said in a breathless voice. "Did that... affect you, sir?"

She was toying with him.

He bared his teeth at her.

"Tell me," she said. "I can't bear this anymore. Why can you not yield?"

"I won't," he said. "Now, take off your dress or leave this room."

“Tell me, and you can undress me yourself.”

“Why are you so insistent on wresting this secret from me?” He eyed her with suspicion. “Are you a woman or a demoness? What have you *done* to me?”

“I...” She bit down on her bottom lip. She looked distressed. “I miss you. I miss your closeness and I miss the pleasure you gave me, but I also miss waking up in your arms. I miss the way we spoke of trifling things at dinner. I miss the way you smiled at me. You had a smile for me, it was all my own, and you haven’t smiled at me in *days*.”

His mouth was dry. She seemed so sincere, but he could not trust it. “If it’s such a hardship for you, then I will be happy to be close to you, to pleasure you, to wake with you, to talk with you. You are the one who insists that I stay away.”

Her bottom lip trembled and she bit down on it again. “I don’t know why I bother speaking to you at *all*.” She picked up her skirts and rushed past him, leaving him alone.

He was an ache. A throb. A pulsing ruin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Elizabeth did not sleep.

She tried, but she was too angry and frustrated and confused by it all. Why should it be such a hardship to deny Mr. Darcy access to her bed? She had lived her whole life without his touch, after all, and that had been no issue. Why now was it so important? What had he done to her?

She was too stubborn to back down, but she was beginning to realize that she had found her match in her husband, who was stubborn as well.

Perhaps they were a matched pair. Perhaps that was why everything between them fit so nicely, as if they had been made for the other. Perhaps...

Oh, but she was likely to murder him before all was said and done.

Furthermore, she was curious. Having discovered the secret of Miss Younge, she wanted to understand it all. If she could not have the answer from Mr. Darcy's lips, perhaps she could discover it another way.

She contrived to get into Mr. Darcy's study in one of the rare times in which he was not there. He was entertaining a guest in the sitting room downstairs, but it was late at night, an odd time for a guest, and he'd been insistent that Georgiana stay clear of the meeting.

Georgiana had been in poor spirits since the dismissal of Miss Younge—even poorer spirits than usual.

Elizabeth was now taking nearly all her meals alone, and perhaps it was loneliness that was driving her to lunacy. She knew not, but she thought that it would all be solved if she could simply discover whatever it was that Mr. Darcy was hiding.

So, she was in the study, but his desk was locked, and she could

not find the key.

She searched everywhere, all over his desk and all along the mantle and the windowsills, all of which were crowded with various sundries—empty glasses and inkwells and paperweights.

Then, horrifyingly, the doorknob turned.

Elizabeth flung herself behind the draperies, which came all the way to the floor. She hid herself entirely, and her heart began to pound.

She could hear voices.

“I don’t see why it should matter where we speak, Mr. Darcy,” came the voice of a man. He sounded young. Elizabeth wanted to look out at him, but she didn’t dare move. Horrifyingly, she felt one of her episodes coming on her, as it had at the ball in Netherfield. She gasped for breath.

“I’ll be more comfortable here,” said Mr. Darcy. “Besides, I wish to show you something.” His voice was hard. She had never heard him speak so. Something about the strangeness of his voice distracted her from her fear. Her breath eased, coming more easily, and she did not feel as if she was being strangled.

“All right,” said the man, who sounded a bit wary.

The sound of the door closing. Of the lock being drawn. Elizabeth could breathe. She was all right. She was too curious to be panicked, she found.

“Ah, yes,” said Mr. Darcy. “Here it is.” Another sound, a sort of metallic ringing noise.

“It’s a... sword.” The young man’s voice was choked.

“Quite sharp too,” said Mr. Darcy in that hard voice of his.

“Mr. Darcy, perhaps—”

“Stay where you are, Whitby,” cut in Mr. Darcy. “You will answer my questions and satisfactorily, too. We were getting nowhere in the sitting room.”

“It wasn’t me, Mr. Darcy,” said the young man, who must have been Whitby. There was a catch in his voice. “I’ve never even met your sister.”

“But you know what I speak of,” said Mr. Darcy. “You know what happened to her.”

“I don’t.” Whitby’s voice was choked. “Not truly.”

“You were with Wickham and the marquess,” said Darcy. “You heard him tell her.”

“Only that he had gotten some heiress with child,” said Whitby.

"I never even remembered her name. Midvale was very, very drunk. I never saw him so drunk. He... you know that his mother was murdered—"

"I don't *care* about his mother," said Darcy.

"He's never been the same since," said Whitby.

"I don't want excuses."

"I've told you. Put the sword away."

"It's convenient to blame it on your friend—"

"I've never touched your sister!"

Silence.

Elizabeth stole a glance around the curtain. Her mind was reeling. The pieces of all of this were coming together.

Mr. Darcy had a sword, and its tip was right under Whitby's chin. Whitby looked little more than a boy. Elizabeth would wager he was not yet seventeen. He was terrified.

"And you will never say a word to anyone else about what you know about her, will you?" said Darcy.

"I don't know *anything*," said Whitby. "She—this heiress—was supposed to be with child, and your sister is not. So, it wasn't her. It must have been someone else."

"Indeed," said Mr. Darcy. He lowered the sword.

Elizabeth carefully ducked back behind the curtain, slowly, so as not to draw attention to herself.

Whitby's breath was noisy. "I'm sorry, Mr. Darcy. I'm so sorry. Midvale, he's... something has gone wrong with his head. He never used to be—"

"Out," came Darcy's voice. "Go. I don't wish to look at you anymore."

"A-all right," said Whitby, his voice quavering.

The door was unlocked and opened. And then it was quiet.

Elizabeth waited.

Finally, she thought they must have both gone, and she chanced looking out from the curtain.

Mr. Darcy was looking straight at her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mr. Darcy glared at his wife. He should have realized she would be so treacherous as to eavesdrop. How long had she been waiting there, hoping to hear some tidbit of information? Well, she knew it all now. He would have to take pains to understand whatever it was that made her so interested in his secrets. He would have to make sure she didn't make any use of them.

She stepped out from behind the curtain. "Georgiana is not with child. Did she go somewhere to have the babe and then—"

"She lost it," said Mr. Darcy. "In Ramsgate, just as Mr. Wickham happened to arrive. A fortunate coincidence for him. Miss Younge was horrified. She thought my sister was dying. It was quite bad, as I understand. She bled and bled and..." His mouth twisted. He couldn't even believe he was saying this out loud. He had never spoken about it with anyone, only Wickham, who had recounted it all in excruciating detail. And he had *not been there*.

Elizabeth's lips parted. "I am... so dreadfully sorry."

"She won't talk about it," said Darcy, grimacing. "Not whose child it was, not how it happened, not..."

Elizabeth nodded slowly. "So, she must have been... it was against her will?"

"I believe so."

The words hung between them, seeming to grow larger, to fill up the entire room. Darcy wished he was still holding his sword in his hands. He wanted to slash through the world, cut everything down.

But there was no one here to loose his anger on.

Well, no one except his wife.

"Now you know," he said, sneering at her. "What will you do with this information?"

She drew back, offended. "Nothing. You can't think that I would
—"

"I don't know what I think." He strode towards her, his nostrils flaring. "Certainly, I should be able to convince you not to hurt my innocent sister when your target is me."

"Mr. Darcy, I do not wish to cause you pain," she protested. She balled her hands up into fists, and her chest rose and fell with her breath. "You are the most wretchedly stupid man, upon my word. Why you would persist in believing something so preposterous about me is nonsense."

"You are very devious," he said, and now he had closed the distance between them, and he was glaring down at her. There was only a scant few inches between their bodies. "You have contrived to learn all manner of things about me, by trickery and by deception. Believing the worst about you is hardly making a leap, madam."

She peered up at him, her face flushed. "How dare you? You insult me constantly, and you wonder why I would have any reason to dislike you."

"Then you admit you dislike me."

"In this moment, I find you horrid."

"Well, I am disgusted with your behavior."

"I shall take my leave of you, then." She started to move around him.

His hand shot out and he took hold of her arm. "Not so fast." Why had the bottom gone out of his voice?

"Let go of me, sir," she said. Her voice wasn't strong either.

He bent his face down to hers, and he captured her lips with his. The kiss was harsh and unforgiving, and he dug his fingers into her arm and pulled her closer. He was determined that he would not let her go, that he would keep her here, close to him, until he had his satisfaction from her, and it had been so damnably long since he'd touched her that he didn't know what that would mean.

She didn't fight him. She opened her mouth to him and seized the lapels of his jacket. She clutched him, pulling him against her, her tongue working against his.

He propelled her backward, and they collided with his desk. He pushed her onto it.

She sat down, dispelling papers, knocking over his inkwell. She gasped.

He felt as if his entire body was squeezed into something that was far too tight, and he was going to explode out of it at any

second. "You... everything about you..."

"What?" she demanded. "What?"

He let out a groan of desperation, of frustration, and he grasped handfuls of her skirts, shoving them up, bunching them at her waist.

She let out a cry, half-strangled. She pushed at his jacket.

He shrugged out of it, wanting the damnable thing off anyway.

She started to fumble at the buttons of his waistcoat, and then seemed to change her mind. Her hands were shaking as they went lower, to his trousers.

He sucked in a breath. He shut his eyes. Everything was dark now, but it was somehow red. He was straining against his clothes, and she freed him, and she *touched* him, and he made a guttural noise into her eyebrow, because his mouth was there somehow, and his hands were inside her dress, and she was panting against him, and the redness was pleasant and somehow bothersome—too much—*everything* was too much.

But he couldn't stop now.

He must have this—*her*—now, and it wouldn't be all right until he was snugly back inside her again, because he belonged there.

And then he was. Then they were joined, both still half dressed, both of them unable to stop kissing whatever part of the other they could get their mouths on.

And he was undone.

* * *

Elizabeth's legs were shaking. Her dress was torn. She was sitting there, on Mr. Darcy's desk, with her knees pressed together in an attempt to be somewhat proper, or to be... oh, she hadn't any notion what she was doing. She examined the rip, which went along her sleeve and made her dress fall down on one side in an obscene manner.

Mr. Darcy was across the room at the window, his forehead pressed against it. His clothes seemed to be in much better shape than hers, didn't they?

Then she noted his cravat was on the floor. It looked as though it had ripped too. Had *she* done that?

Why were her legs shaking so badly? She moved her skirts, covering her bare knees.

"Mr. Darcy?" she whispered.

"You should really call me by my first name, don't you think? At

least when we're..." He didn't look away from the window.

"Fitzwilliam," she said.

"Fitz." A command. Curt.

She wished her legs would stop shaking. "You can't truly think that I dislike you." Oh, Lord, her voice was shaking too. "I don't, you know. I feel as though, if I lost you, that I would be bereft. I am very badly in love with you, and it hurts me more than I can say that you think I wish to harm you. How can you persist in thinking that?"

He turned to look at her.

Her legs were shaking so much that they shook her skirts. She pressed her hands to her thighs, trying to make them stop. She felt vaguely lightheaded, and... and good. Sated. Filled. The shaking, though, it was some sort of response that she didn't seem to be able to stop.

He came across the room for her, and he pulled her off the desk.

But now, she couldn't stand. She collided with him.

He wrapped an arm around her, holding her against him. "I love you, too."

She smiled up at him, and her heart swelled.

He put his other hand to her face, rubbing a thumb against her cheekbone. "I've never felt this way, Elizabeth. It frightens me."

"Yes, I understand," she murmured. "Me, as well."

"We... can face it together, then," he said. "No more secrets."

She smiled wider. "Truly?"

"Truly."

And then he kissed her, and she clung to him, and she felt as if she were basking in the warm summer sun on a perfect day.

Until he let go of her and deposited her in a chair beside the desk. "So, let me explain it, then. I am almost entirely sure that the Marquess of Midvale is the man who violated Georgiana. His father, the Duke of Bellingshire, has a country estate that borders Pemberley. They are not always in Derbyshire, of course, it is only one of their holdings. But it would have been possible for him to have come onto our estate and to... to hurt her. I was probably away when it happened. She likely had no one. That nurse of hers, she was old. She was wont to take afternoon naps. My sister must have been terrified when she realized she was with child. She told no one of that either. When I think of the pain she suffered for all that time, concealing it from me..." He had walked back across the

room as he spoke. He was at the window again, peering out into the darkness.

Elizabeth twisted to look at him over the back of the chair.

“Wickham knows of this?”

“Wickham found it out from the marquess himself,” said Darcy.

“The marquess is young, a year or two older than Georgiana. He was playing some game of cards that Wickham happened to have horned in on, which is the sort of thing Wickham does, you understand? Preys upon young, rich schoolboys in Cambridge. They don’t know better, and he gets them to gamble things away that they oughtn’t. He plies them with drink. He takes advantage. But this time, he got a secret out of the marquess, and he sped off to Ramsgate, where he had heard that Georgiana was with her governess, Miss Younge. He arrived just in time to *witness* the miscarriage. So, he has used that to manipulate me ever since.”

“I don’t understand,” said Elizabeth. “How did the marquess know that Georgiana was with child if she did not tell anyone?”

“She must have told him,” said Mr. Darcy.

“She confronted her attacker with this information?” said Elizabeth.

Mr. Darcy turned away from the window. “What are you saying?”

Elizabeth hesitated. “I... am not certain of anything. Only...”

“I’m going to go and find the marquess, and I am going to manufacture some sort of slight between us, and then I’m going to challenge him to a duel. Then I’ll kill him.”

“What?” Elizabeth got to her feet. Her voice was shrill. “Are you mad?”

Darcy glared at her. “I can’t very well challenge him for what he’s actually done, can I? Nor can I seek any other justice, not without ruining my sister further. She has been through too much as it is.”

“A duel? You can’t possibly do such a thing!” She clasped her hands together in front of her body. “What if it wasn’t an attack?”

Mr. Darcy regarded her. “What do you mean?”

“I only...” She squared her shoulders. “If Georgiana told him she was with child, then perhaps she was... willing.”

“She was fifteen. She knew nothing of the world. How could she have consented under such circumstances? Even if she did, she did not. Not truly.” There was a warning in Mr. Darcy’s voice, telling

her to leave off this line of questioning.

She ignored it. "Even so, she may have fancied herself in love with him, and there is no reason to assume that the... activity was so very unpleasant, after all—"

"Listen, simply because you and I are so well matched, that is no reason to overlook how brutish this could go between a man and a woman. Perhaps you can't imagine—"

"No, I was told it would be quite an ordeal," said Elizabeth. "So, I can imagine, certainly. But wouldn't you rather Georgiana didn't suffer?"

"Why wouldn't she tell me about it then?"

"She's likely embarrassed and ashamed of herself," said Elizabeth. "And he... well, he should have married her, but he obviously didn't."

"See?" Darcy spread his hands. "It makes no difference. He hurt my sister. I have to kill him."

"But—"

"No, we shall not discuss this any further."

"You don't get to decide everything, you know, Fitz," said Elizabeth. "If I want to speak to you—"

"We're done," he said. He went and opened the door and nodded at the hallway.

She glared at him. "You can't be serious."

He said nothing.

She got to her feet. She hurled herself into the hallway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“What are you doing here?” Georgiana sat up in her bed, her hair looking as if it had been marred by a great deal of tossing and turning.

Elizabeth was in the doorway to Georgiana’s bedchamber. She had come here first thing in the morning. She didn’t know what she was going to do to entice Georgiana to speak to her when the girl hadn’t spoken to her own brother, and when the girl didn’t even care for Elizabeth, but she could not let her husband fight a duel.

“Julian,” said Elizabeth.

Georgiana’s eyes widened.

“I believe that’s his given name,” said Elizabeth. “Julian Thorton, the Marquess of Midvale. Do you know of whom I speak?”

Georgiana tossed aside the covers of the bed. “What do you want? Why are you here?”

“Your brother, my husband, is going to kill Julian,” said Elizabeth. “What do you think of that?”

Georgiana paused, froze in place, feet halfway to the floor.

“If he hurt you, if he forced you—”

“No.” Georgiana placed her feet on the floor. “No, it wasn’t like that. He was... his mother was killed. He found her body. Her throat was slit. No one knew who did it. He was devastated. He would walk around behind his estate, and I would be riding my horse, and we’d meet. We’d talk, and he would cry, and I would comfort him. And somehow, the comforting, it...” She sank her hands into her hair. “I knew I was supposed to say no, but he was so sad, and it felt so nice.”

Elizabeth held out a hand to her sister-in-law. “You loved him.”

Georgiana’s eyes shone. She nodded once. She put her hand in Elizabeth’s.

Elizabeth squeezed her hand.

"I couldn't tell Fitz about it," muttered Georgiana. "I... I don't know what happened. After I knew that I was... that there was a babe, I went to Julian. I told him, and he said we would get married. He was supposed to come for me." She shook her head, a tear spilling out onto her cheek. "I waited for him. He never came."

"That was very dishonorable of him," said Elizabeth. "He didn't even send word?"

"A letter," said Georgiana. "But it was so very vague that I couldn't make sense of it. He said that he was delayed, that he was unable to come, that he was sorry. But from what I heard, he was playing card games with Mr. Wickham, willing enough to tell him the whole sordid story, so... what delayed him? Why was he unable?"

"I suppose you haven't heard from him since?"

"Not one word." Georgiana's voice was hard. "He is a wretch. He has used me badly. He... I *ought* to wish him dead. But Fitz can't *kill* him. I can't let him do that."

"I'm glad you agree," said Elizabeth. "Because I can't let Fitz fight a duel. It's too dangerous. We'll have to find some other way of getting to the bottom of this. I agree that the marquess should be held accountable for what he did to you. You suffered, and he did not. But death is not the way. Will you please talk to your brother? Tell him what happened?"

"I..." Georgiana pulled her hand out of Elizabeth's. "How can I? He'll think so badly of me."

"He won't," said Elizabeth. "He loves you."

"He might not love me, not if he knows."

"I am certain that won't be the case," said Elizabeth. "But if you'd like, I shall come with you to talk to him. Would that help?"

* * *

Mr. Darcy glared at Elizabeth from the other side of his desk. "You have put her up to saying this, haven't you?"

Elizabeth and Georgiana were sitting facing the desk in Mr. Darcy's study, and Elizabeth was gripping Georgiana's hand. She glared at her husband. "I might have thought you would accuse me of such a thing. What do you take me for, sir?"

Mr. Darcy turned to Georgiana. "It's all right. You don't have to say whatever it is that she told you to say. You don't have to protect that monster."

"But I don't want you to kill him," said Georgiana.

“Besides, *you* could be killed,” said Elizabeth.

Darcy snorted. “That boy could never best me.”

“With pistols, many things can go wrong,” said Elizabeth.

“Dueling is barbaric, and you are better than that, sir.”

“I can’t believe you brought my sister into our argument.” He shook his head at her. “You, madam, surprise me with the depths to which you sink.”

“Stop!” said Georgiana. “Don’t be angry with her. I would not be pleased to discover that you killed Julian.”

Mr. Darcy made a face as if something smelled bad. “So, it’s *Julian*, is it? Where was Julian when you were bleeding at that inn in Ramsgate, hmm? Where was he when you were brought home to me, your face ghostly white, when you didn’t utter a *word* for weeks?”

“I don’t know,” said Georgiana, her face falling. “I am not defending him, Fitz. I am quite angry with him. But he didn’t force me to do what I did with him, and I knew the consequences. I should have stopped him.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Elizabeth.

“No,” said Mr. Darcy. “It’s not.” He glanced at her.

She gave him a little smile.

He sighed. “I don’t think it matters. He’s a villain. He’s not a rapist, but that doesn’t make him a capital fellow, either. He still deserves to die.”

“An inn, and all that blood,” said Elizabeth suddenly, her mind turning. “How did you conceal it? Did you pay off everyone that worked at the inn? Did a doctor attend you, Georgiana? Are you paying him off as well?”

“They took me from the inn to the doctor,” said Georgiana, “and Mr. Wickham gave him a different name than my own. He gave a false name for himself as well and pretended to be my husband. I don’t know about the inn.”

“Is this important?” said Mr. Darcy, eyes flashing. “I assure you, I have taken pains to be sure that no one knows of this.”

“All right,” said Elizabeth. “Well, anyway, where were we?”

“I’m killing him, anyway,” said Mr. Darcy darkly.

“You’re not,” said Georgiana. “I don’t want him dead.”

Mr. Darcy surveyed his sister. “So, then, what do you want? Do you want him to marry you? Do you want to forget it ever happened? Do you want to debut in society and find another

husband? Whatever you want, tell me.”

“I want... to know why,” she said.

“Why?” said Mr. Darcy. “Well, I don’t see that there’s much to know about that. You’re very pretty, and he’s very—”

“No, not that.” She flushed. “I mean, why didn’t he come back for me like he said he would? Why didn’t he marry me?”

“He can’t have a good excuse,” said Mr. Darcy.

“Probably not,” said Georgiana. “But I still need to know.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Darcy. “I was going to seek him out to kill him. I suppose I can drag him back to you to answer your questions first. If they aren’t satisfactory, can I run him through?”

“Fitz,” said Georgiana, giving him a stern look.

“I suppose if I simply murdered him, I’d have to hide the body,” said Mr. Darcy.

“You’d be hanged,” said Elizabeth.

He sighed. “If I bring him to you, I don’t see how I’m going to find a way to challenge him to a duel.”

“I don’t want him dead!” Georgiana’s eyes flashed, now, and she looked very like her brother when she did it.

“Yes, yes,” said Darcy, sounding a little sulky. “I understand.”

* * *

“What are you doing?” Elizabeth stood in the doorway to Mr. Darcy’s bedchamber.

“Overseeing the packing,” he said. His valet and another servant were taking clothing out of his wardrobe.

“You’re leaving?” said Elizabeth.

Mr. Darcy spoke in a low voice to his valet and the other servant, and the two men both left the room, shutting the door behind them. He crossed the room to her. “Yes, my darling, you were in the same room as I was when we spoke to my sister. She wants me to find the marquess, so I am going to do exactly that.”

“When?” said Elizabeth.

“In the morning,” said Mr. Darcy.

“I want to come with you,” she said.

“Out of the question,” he said.

“Why?”

“I’m going on horseback,” he said. “I seem to remember that you’re not very fond of horses. Besides, it’s a punishing way for women to travel.”

“We’ll take a carriage instead.”

"I'm not taking you along."

"But I think you could use my help," she said. "As you've pointed out, I've discovered quite a few things on my own, just from being here and making observations. If you want the truth from the marquess, you might need me."

"You can get the truth from him when I bring him back here," he said.

"Oh, come now, Fitz, you don't really want to leave me, do you?" She raised her eyebrows.

"Well," he said, reaching out to encircle her waist with one arm. "I have to admit that I shall miss you a great deal. We'll have to make the most of tonight."

She felt warm at the promise in his voice. She reached up to touch his face, tracing the outline of his jaw. "If you take me along, we can spend every night in an inn, in each other's arms."

He shut his eyes against her touch. "You'll distract me." His voice was softer.

"I won't," she said. "You'll be distracted by my absence, by wanting me."

He chuckled. His eyes opened. "I'm not taking you along."

"Yes," she said. "You should."

"I can't leave Georgiana alone without a governess," he said.

"So, I'm supposed to stay here and play nursemaid to your sister?"

"Don't say such things so loud. She could hear you. Trust me, she would take offense." He kissed her. "I'll be back as soon as I can. I won't be gone longer than a week."

Her hand cupped the back of his neck. "A week?"

"Five days," he said. "No longer."

"Fitz, don't leave me behind," she said.

He put his mouth against her temple. "Three days."

"No, I can't bear it," she said. "Stay until we find a new governess for Georgiana."

He smiled at her. "Tempting, I must admit, but I can't agree. The sooner we settle all this, the sooner we can concentrate on each other. I must go, find the marquess, and be back quickly. Then you and I will go away somewhere alone, and we will not get dressed for days."

She giggled. "That does sound lovely."

"Yes," he said, and he reached around her to work at the buttons

on the back of her dress.

She sighed. "But it's not enough. If you let me go with you to find the marquess, nothing will stop us from also going away together once everything is settled. It's better that way, Fitz, you must see that."

He had bared her shoulder, and he kissed it. "No."

She sighed. "Let me convince you that I should come along."

He chuckled. "You could try."

She put her hands on his chest and shoved him backwards onto his bed. "I will succeed, husband. Don't doubt me."

He grinned up at her, so handsome it made her heart hurt. "Well, do your worst, then, Elizabeth. I am helpless against you, I must admit."

* * *

But in the morning, he was gone, using that dreadful skill of his to climb out of bed without waking her. She woke up all alone in his cold bed, and she threw herself out of bed and went out looking for him in her shift, not even properly dressed. The butler, scandalized by her lack of dress, told her that Mr. Darcy had left on horseback at first light.

She was so angry, she could have strangled her husband. Of course, that was impossible, considering he wasn't there.

At breakfast that morning, she informed Georgiana that they would be searching for a new governess for her.

"Another governess?" Georgiana made a face. "I hardly see what I need one for."

"You need a companion," said Elizabeth. "You can't be on your own."

"Oh, I can't be trusted on my own, I suppose?" She glared at Elizabeth coldly. "You don't think I've learned my lesson?"

Elizabeth sighed. "It's not personal, it's simply the way things are done, Georgiana."

"I don't think I need a governess anymore," said Georgiana. "If Miss Younge is any indication, they are not much in the way of companions anyway."

"Well, Miss Younge had her reasons for behaving the way she did," said Elizabeth. "She was always distant, wasn't she? Not much of a conversationalist. We shall find someone who you get on quite nicely with. We'll find the perfect governess, someone who you will enjoy spending time with."

Georgiana raised her eyebrows. "I don't think that's possible."

"It is," Elizabeth declared.

Georgiana took a drink of her chocolate and set down the cup.

"Do you even know the first thing about procuring a governess?"

"Of course."

Georgiana simply regarded her, disbelief written all over her countenance.

Elizabeth huffed. "Well, I shall learn."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was days before any candidates for the position of governess could be interviewed, and Elizabeth thought that Mr. Darcy might be home by then, because he had told her he would only be gone three days. But a letter came from him instead, apologizing, saying it was all taking longer than he thought it would.

She fumed. If she had only been allowed to go along with him, they wouldn't be separated.

But it would be better if Georgiana had someone with her, and so Elizabeth put her attentions solely to the task of finding the right governess.

Georgiana was little help. Elizabeth wanted her to be part of the interview process, so that Georgiana could find a governess that suited her. She had thought that she would be able to observe the two of them together and she would be able to see which one would get on best with Georgiana.

But Georgiana insisted on being surly and difficult. She seemed to be attempting to frighten off all of the candidates by insinuating that she was a problematic charge.

Elizabeth found herself wanting to strangle her sister-in-law as well. Near as she could see, the stubborn streak that ran through the Darcy family was insupportable. It was lucky that Elizabeth was just as stubborn. She wasn't about to give up and leave Georgiana without a governess at all.

A week hence, she sat down with her sister-in-law in the sitting room one afternoon. "All right," she said, "we have seen nearly ten possible governesses. We must make a decision from them."

"I don't want a governess," said Georgiana.

"I well know that," said Elizabeth. "But since that is not an option, you must choose anyway. Pick the lesser evil, as it were."

Georgiana pursed her lips.

"Listen, it is not a personal affront," said Elizabeth. "Your brother trusts you. I trust you. Indeed, however, people would talk if you were not accompanied by someone, and you don't wish that, do you?"

Georgiana sighed heavily. "Miss Grantham, then."

"What?" Elizabeth shook her head. "Miss Grantham is old enough to be my mother. She's hardly going to wish to keep up with you."

"I liked her," said Georgiana, lifting her chin.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "You are picking her because she is old and because you think you can easily give her the slip, like your old nanny in Pemberley, who should have been watching you instead of napping, and then you would have been prevented from getting into this calamity!"

Georgiana sniffed. "You see? You don't trust me."

Elizabeth huffed. "Oh, you are maddening!"

Georgiana gave her a look that seemed to delight in having caused Elizabeth's temper to flare.

Elizabeth took a deep breath, resolving not to give her such pleasure again. She must cease to think of Georgiana as anything other than a silly young girl, like her sisters. Why, she was Lydia's age, and Elizabeth could just imagine Lydia behaving in such a manner. So, if it were Lydia she dealt with, how would she proceed?

Elizabeth squared her shoulders. "One more chance, Georgiana. Be reasonable. Tell me which of the candidates you prefer or I shall choose one for you."

Georgiana tapped her chin, making a show of thinking it over. "Miss Davis."

"Miss Davis?" Elizabeth snorted. "She was ten years older than you. You don't think I am onto your scheme?"

"Perhaps I wish to be in the company of someone mature," said Georgiana. "Perhaps you don't understand anything about me."

Elizabeth inclined her head. "All right, since you refuse to take this endeavor seriously, I shall make a decision for you. As I see it, there are only two possible candidates who would be appropriate for you. I think either Miss Burney or Miss McKenzie. What do you think of them?"

Georgiana shrugged. "I can't remember either of them."

"They both were proficient in playing the piano, something you enjoy, considering how often you are at the instrument," said

Elizabeth. "Miss Burney is a bit more severe than I think you should like. You would chafe under her instruction. On the other hand, Miss McKenzie is rather young and pretty, and her Scottish brogue is likely enticing. I imagine she'd be snatched up by some man and married within the year. But she is the one who I think would be the best match for your temperament. She is bright and witty and she has a sense of humor. She was quite adept at fielding your surly comments during the interview and did it without any rancor. She is perfect, so we shall hope that she stays unmarried long enough to be your companion for some time and hire *her*."

Georgiana folded her arms over her chest. "I don't see what you wanted me here for at all if you were simply going to decide without me."

Elizabeth had given her a choice. Georgiana had refused to cooperate. Elizabeth spread her hands. "I don't know either. You can go, I suppose."

Georgiana got to her feet and gave Elizabeth such a look that Elizabeth didn't know whether to be frightened or to laugh.

* * *

When Miss McKenzie took up residence in the house, Georgiana's mood improved significantly, and Elizabeth enjoyed the woman's company as well.

Finally, there were lively conversations at dinner. Miss McKenzie was like a bright flame who lit up the entire room. She even made Georgiana laugh, which was a feat, as Elizabeth well knew.

But it had now been over a week, and Mr. Darcy had still not returned, and no letter from him either.

One morning, Elizabeth received news of a letter, and she tore down to get it, only to realize that it was not from her husband. Instead, she recognized the handwriting of her sister, Jane.

Oh, dear.

How long had it been since she wrote to Jane? Far too long, indeed. She had been so utterly preoccupied with everything that had transpired since she arrived here that she had neglected her sister.

Chagrined, she clutched the letter to her chest and went up to the privacy of her room to read it.

Jane began with an earnest inquiry over Elizabeth's health and well-being. Having not heard from Elizabeth in so long, she was worried over her sister.

Elizabeth felt this like a stab to her heart. She knew that Jane would never scold her. It was not her way. Of course her sister feared the worst, instead of thinking Elizabeth neglectful. She should have written. She was not sure what she could have put in the letters, of course. She could not reveal the secrets of the family, not in writing. She was certain she could confide in Jane over it all, and that Jane would never say a word, but not in a letter, only in person.

Jane continued, however, to say that she was writing with good tidings. Mr. Bingley had asked for her hand and she had accepted. Jane was happy, but she went on at length about hoping to make things better with Miss Bingley, who had apparently not taken the news well. She had said something rather horrid to Jane about it all, professing Jane to be unworthy of her brother, and Mr. Bingley had been quite cross with her. Jane, however, made excuses for the woman and said that she could not bear to quarrel with a woman would be her sister soon. She said she must find a way to ease Miss Bingley's discomfort.

This, too, was just like Jane. Elizabeth wanted to tell her that she should not care a bit for the woman's idiocy, to ignore Miss Bingley. But Jane would never do such a thing.

As soon as she had finished the letter, Elizabeth wrote a response, first conveying her congratulations on her sister's impending nuptials, and then expressing her deep apologies for not having written earlier. She told Jane that things were well here, that she and Mr. Darcy had grown closer, and about the search for Georgiana's governess. She sent the letter off that very afternoon.

Two days later, she had a response from her sister.

But still nothing from Mr. Darcy.

She read Jane's note, which shared a bit about Mr. Collins coming to stay and visit Charlotte Lucas, and how much their mother was not pleased with this at all, and detailing more plans for the wedding.

Elizabeth wrote back again.

She was now quite worried about her husband. It was one thing for him to be gone for longer than he expected. It was another entirely for him not to send word. What if he'd gotten himself into some sort of scrape? What if he'd decided to fight a duel after all? Certainly, if he were dead, someone would have sent them word.

Outwardly, she was all smiles at dinner with Miss McKenzie and

Georgiana. Inwardly, she was in turmoil.

* * *

Late at night, Elizabeth awoke to the door to her bedroom opening.

She sat up straight in bed and lit a lamp on the bedside table. The scant light illuminated Mr. Darcy, only in his nightshirt and small clothes. His hair was wet.

"I washed off the road before I came to you," he murmured. "I knew I shouldn't wake you, but—"

She leaped out of the bed and ran to him. She threw herself into his arms.

He clutched her tightly, and he sought her lips.

For some time, they only kissed, furiously, unable to stop themselves.

She felt it go through her like a storm wind, the sensations this man wrought within her. She never wanted to let go of him. But she was also frightfully cross with him, in light of everything, and so eventually, she forced herself to pull away. "You were gone for far longer than three days."

"I know," he said. "Believe me, it was torture." He traced the outline of her lips with one finger. "I thought of you constantly."

"You could have sent more letters." She strove to put some ire in her tone, but there was something about being in his presence that seemed to rob her voice of strength.

"I apologize," he said. "I was consumed with my search. I couldn't find him."

"No?" This gave her pause. "You must have searched the whole of England in this time."

"Yes," said Mr. Darcy. "I had hoped to have help. There was a man who was helping me gather information, Mr. Giles, but he has been otherwise engaged as of late, so it fell entirely to me. I searched high and low. I even went to the holdings that the duke has in Scotland. The marquess is nowhere to be found. No one has seen him in months. I went back to his friends, the ones I spoke to, who were in that card game with Mr. Wickham. They haven't seen him since the card game. It's as if he disappeared into thin air."

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. "You don't think..."

"That he's dead?" Darcy sighed. "It would be a fitting end for him, I believe."

"But that could be why he didn't come for Georgiana. Perhaps,

even after that card game, he meant to, but he was prevented from doing so. His mother had her throat slit, do you know that?"

"Yes, I have thought of that," said Mr. Darcy. "I even asked a few questions about what happened. It seems it was a robbery. Some of her jewels were reported missing afterwards. The thief must have been surprised by her and killed her in order to get away. I can't see how it's related."

"Yes, or tried to make it look as though it was a thief," said Elizabeth. "It's not difficult to take some jewelry if you've already slit a woman's throat. Does anyone have any reason to kill her? To also kill her son?"

He sighed. "I don't know. I don't want to think he's dead, to be honest. Then we can never have any satisfaction from him."

She thought about this. "Yes, perhaps it's unwise to leap to conclusions. We shall continue to assume he's alive and seek his whereabouts. Have you any avenues you have not pursued?"

"Well, the duke, his father, is in London now. I thought I would go and see him tomorrow. A father would know the whereabouts of his son, would he not?"

"Yes, that's a good idea. We shall go together."

He chuckled. "Oh, shall we?"

She put the flat of her palm against his chest. "I have secured a perfect governess for Georgiana, and you have no more excuses to keep me from being with you. As a trip across town hardly merits any concern anyway, you will not prevent me from coming along with you."

"No," he said, "I will not. I have missed you so very badly, my lovely wife." He kissed her again.

She sagged against him, sighing. "Oh, why are we talking of this now? Now is not the time for talking."

"What is it time for?" he said in a low, lilting voice.

"Well, for wearing less clothes, for one thing," she said. "For being in bed, for another."

"I find your suggestions most agreeable," he growled, and he was kissing her again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Duke of Bellingshire looked Mr. Darcy over gruffly. "You. You're the one who owns that estate in Derbyshire."

They were in the sitting room of Bellingshire's townhouse, but they were not sitting. The duke was on his feet, looking them both over. He did not seem pleased to have received them. Elizabeth wasn't sure what to make of the duke. He seemed to have a look of disgust permanently etched on his features. He held himself very straight, and his cravat seemed exceedingly tight at his neck.

"That's right," said Mr. Darcy. "Darcy." He nodded to Elizabeth. "This is my wife, Mrs. Darcy."

"It's quite an honor to meet you." Elizabeth curtsied.

"Your mother is the, um, daughter of Matlock," said the duke.

"Yes," said Mr. Darcy. "She was."

"Oh." The duke winced. "Terribly sorry. I did not mean to bring up any pain from your past."

"It's quite all right," said Mr. Darcy.

"As you may have heard, my own wife was lost to me lately," said the duke, turning and making his way over to a couch. He sat down and gestured for them to sit across from him on another matching couch. "I am still in mourning over her, in fact, though I am trying to find it within myself to marry again. It's not good for a man to be alone, after all. Still, with the loss of her so deeply etched in my recent memory..." He sighed. "Never mind all this gloominess. What can I help you with today?"

"This is a lovely sitting room," said Elizabeth, looking around. "The curtains, especially. I have not seen their equal."

"Thank you," said Bellingshire. "My late wife, she is the decorator. That is the way of it, isn't it? After a loss, all subjects seem to circle back to the one who is gone." He bowed his head, and for a moment, seemed overcome. But then he straightened,

shaking himself. "My apologies, truly."

"Let us speak of something happier," said Mr. Darcy.

"Yes, please," said Bellingshire.

But at that moment, the door opened and a servant came in with tea and biscuits and bread and butter.

"Ah, Becky, wonderful," said Bellingshire. "Will you make up some tea for me how I like it, then, with just the right amount of sugar?"

"Of course, sir," said Becky.

"And you?" said Bellingshire to them. "Will you have some tea?"

"Certainly, thank you," said Mr. Darcy.

Becky served them all, and then she curtsied and left them.

Bellingshire took three biscuits and dipped one into his tea almost daintily. He took a careful bite of it.

"These are delicious," said Elizabeth. "Quite lovely."

Bellingshire continued to chew. When he was done, he thanked her. "But now we have diverted long enough. There is a reason you have come."

"Indeed, the reason is your son," said Mr. Darcy. "The marquess. I have some business I need to attend to with him, but I have been unable to locate him."

"Business." Bellingshire snorted. "That child conducts no business except drinking and cards."

"Well, it is on the matter of a card game, in fact." Mr. Darcy smiled. "My wife played with him at a whist party."

"And he didn't pay his debts, I suppose?" said Bellingshire. "I can hardly say I'm surprised." He turned to Elizabeth. "Madam, how much did he owe you? I shall make it good."

"No, no, that's not necessary," said Elizabeth.

"No, it's the other way around," said Mr. Darcy. "My wife foolishly gambled away an heirloom of her family, something she treasures, and we should like to find the marquess and buy it back from him. That is all."

"Yes," said Elizabeth. "So, if you could tell us where he is, we would be most grateful." She was finding it remarkable how easily Mr. Darcy had come up with this lie, how glibly it fell from his lips. "My husband, he was rather cross with me that I've been so insistent we seek him out."

Mr. Darcy gave her a look, disapproving, but she could see the amusement in his eyes. "Yes, well, we all know how a man can't get

a moment's peace when a woman makes up her mind about something, don't we?"

"Indeed," muttered Bellingshire. "As it happens, however, I have no idea where my son is."

"No idea at all?" said Elizabeth.

"None," said Bellingshire. "The last time I saw him, I was not pleased with him. We quarreled, and he left, and I have not heard from him since."

"Ah, how unfortunate," said Mr. Darcy.

"He has gone rather wild in the wake of his mother's death, you see. She spoiled him, and he is not used to a firm hand. For too long, I left the childrearing in my wife's hands, and she was not skilled in teaching him to rein in his worser nature, I'm afraid."

Elizabeth found this an interesting thing to say about a dead woman.

"Women are often soft on such things," said Mr. Darcy.

"Yes, and he has not profited," said Bellingshire. "He is a spendthrift, and his behavior is ruinous. I told him that he must reform, and he laughed in my face." He picked up another biscuit and surveyed it, and now he didn't sit quite so straight. "And for all that... I regret what I said. I was in the right, you know, I was. He must change his behavior." He looked up at Mr. Darcy, as if expecting a challenge, but when none was offered, Bellingshire turned back to his biscuit. "However, if I had but been a bit more gentle, perhaps there would be no rift between us. If I saw him again, I would do what I could to make it right."

"Of course you would," said Elizabeth in a soft voice. "He is your son, after all."

"Just so," said Bellingshire. He gave her a rueful smile. "If you do find him, madam, would you give him a message for me? Would you tell him that I miss him, and that I wish he would come home?"

"I would be honored to do so," said Elizabeth.

* * *

"I'm not sure what to make of that man," said Elizabeth ruefully. "Already seeking another wife? Insulting his late wife's memory and saying she was remiss in her duties raising their son? I'm not sure I like him. I suspect the marquess has his reasons for avoiding the man."

She and Mr. Darcy were in the sitting room at home. Miss McKenzie had gone up to her room for the night, but Georgiana had

stayed behind, eager for news about the marquess.

"He never talked about his father," Georgiana spoke up. "I don't think they were very close."

"He may be a difficult man," said Mr. Darcy. "But I think the feeling he showed for his son was genuine, did you not?"

"Yes, I did," said Elizabeth. "He seems to mourn his wife, even though he is eager to replace her. I don't suppose I understand that at all."

"Well, a duke is in need of a duchess, is he not?" said Mr. Darcy. "She would have overseen much of the household. He probably feels lost without that."

Elizabeth eyed him. "You are in quite a rush to defend this man."

"And you to condemn him," said Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth sighed. "I have to admit, I didn't like him from the first moment we clapped eyes on him. He stood too straight. He kept his cravat tied too tightly. Something about him, it made me furious."

Mr. Darcy arched an eyebrow. "I think you have a prejudice against wealth and status, my love."

She scoffed. "That's preposterous."

"Will you explain to me once more what it was exactly that caused you to set yourself so hard against me? You disliked me with great vigor."

"Oh, you are easy to dislike, Fitz," spoke up Georgiana.

Darcy shot her a withering look. "No comments from you, Georgiana. I have no need of your opinion on this."

Georgiana shrugged. "Very well."

"Oh, don't give in to him," said Elizabeth. "I am quite in need of your support in this. We must show solidarity against him."

A smile split Darcy's face.

Elizabeth pointed at him. "You will not laugh at me."

"Why didn't you like me?"

"Because you said I was ugly!" she burst out with.

"Did you truly, Fitz?" said Georgiana.

"I did not say anything of the sort," said Darcy. "I said you were not handsome."

"Oh, and that's much better," snorted Elizabeth.

"It is," he said. "It is a bit better. Besides, I told you I never thought that, that I was quite destroyed by your beauty from the moment I clapped eyes upon you. I have devoted myself to you, and I think you were quite unfair to have disliked me for so long."

"Well, I stopped disliking you once you told me that you didn't think I was ugly," said Elizabeth.

"You didn't. You continued to dislike me for some time."

"You just *thought* I did," said Elizabeth, glaring at him.

Mr. Darcy shrugged. "We both know that's not the case."

"How could you know how I *feel*?"

Georgiana snickered.

They both turned to look at her.

"Is this what you do all the time, the two of you? Have ridiculous quarrels?"

"We don't quarrel," said Mr. Darcy. "This was not a quarrel."

"No, indeed," said Elizabeth.

"I think it is rather amazing that you are arguing about whether or not you like each other or not," said Georgiana.

"I am in love with your brother, deeply in love," said Elizabeth, smiling at him.

"And I am devoted to Mrs. Darcy," said her husband. "She is everything to me."

"Oh, the both of you are going to make me vomit," Georgiana decided. "How long until you grow tired of each other, truly?"

"Tired of her? Impossible," said Mr. Darcy. "At any rate, you are correct, Georgiana, we should attend ourselves to the matter at hand and leave this business behind. The duke has his, shall we say, rough edges? He seems to think rather poorly of women. Personally, I do not hold with such thinking, but I know many men who make careless comments denigrating the fair sex, and I thought it was better to simply agree with him so that we could get him to tell us all he knew."

"Except he knew nothing," said Elizabeth.

"True," said Mr. Darcy, sighing. "We are nowhere. We have nothing to go on. There is only one place that I have not sought the marquess, and that is because I thought if I were to go, we should all go. He could be in Derbyshire."

"I don't think so, Fitz," said Georgiana. "If his father doesn't know where he is, I highly doubt he's anywhere in any of his father's properties."

"You are likely right," said Mr. Darcy. "But I should like Elizabeth to see Pemberley, and you would be happier there, would you not? You and Miss McKenzie could go riding. You could take walks on the grounds."

"It is November, Fitz," said Georgiana. "There will likely be snow before too long."

"You enjoy walking in the snow," said Mr. Darcy. "At least you always used to."

"You're going to abandon me at Pemberley," said Georgiana.

"When I find the marquess," said Darcy, "I shall wish to be as discreet as possible. Bringing him to you at Pemberley is better than bringing him here, do you not see that?"

Georgiana considered this. "Well, perhaps you are right. You could have led with that argument. In the future, Fitz, remember that I am much more swayed by practicality than appeals to my comfort. I am not so shallow as that."

Mr. Darcy looked amused, but he schooled himself. "I shall remember, my dear sister," he said as solemnly as he could manage.

Georgiana looked him over, sniffing, but she accepted it.

* * *

And so, they were off to Pemberley.

Arrangements were made and trunks were packed. Carriages were filled. Goodbyes were said. They traveled over the course of several days, breaking the journey into manageable chunks so as not to be too long in the carriage each day.

But they finally arrived at Pemberley, and when the estate came into view, Elizabeth was rather shocked. She had not expected something so very grand. Why it was ten times the size of Longbourn, at least it seemed so from her vantage point here, looking up the hill at the house, which perched there stern and imperious, lording over the surrounding area in its splendor.

And I am mistress of all this, she thought, panic rising within her. How had she so badly underestimated how wealthy Mr. Darcy was?

No, she had not underestimated it, she simply hadn't considered it, not well. She had thought more of other things, not the ten thousand a year she knew he had. They had lived in comfort, even splendor, in London, but even this had not prepared her for the sight of this house, this estate, this... everything.

Mr. Darcy leaned close, his breath tickling her ear as he spoke to her in a low voice. "Do you approve of it?"

She turned to him, her lips parting, unable to find her voice.

He smiled at her. "I take it you do?"

"It is quite the house, sir." She was breathless.

"It is yours," he said. "Everything that is mine is yours, you

know?"

She only shook her head. Sometimes, being with this man was like a ballad, something flighty and wispy, all romance and happy endings and impossibility. Sometimes, of course, she wanted to murder him. Perhaps that was the balance.

But in that moment, she could only feel that she could not believe this was her life. How had she, the second daughter of Mr. Bennet of Longbourn, come to this?

Mr. Darcy chuckled. "You have some fault to find with it, do you not? Your good opinion is not easily bestowed."

"I do not, indeed." She laughed, glancing at him. "You are far too hard on me, sir."

"Am I?" He smiled. "You poor, dear thing, incapable of receiving the selfsame dish you serve."

She lifted her chin. "How dare you?" But she was not truly angry. She knew he was teasing her.

He looked at her with smoldering eyes, and she wanted to kiss him. But Georgiana and Miss McKenzie were already looking uncomfortable at their exchange, and such a thing would be utterly improper. She threaded her fingers within his instead, and she felt the pressure of his large, warm palm against hers. She gazed at him and sighed.

She *loved* this man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was late afternoon when they arrived, and Elizabeth was shown to her rooms in Pemberley. Bess scurried about, getting everything settled for her, and Elizabeth wrote a letter to Jane to tell her sister where she was and where Jane should address her letters for the foreseeable future.

However, Elizabeth thought they might be leaving Pemberley soon enough if they found anything to tell them of the marquess's whereabouts. She thought it was right that he was unlikely to be in Derbyshire.

They had dinner in the largest dining room Elizabeth had ever seen. It had high ceilings and a long, long table that seemed to stretch out for miles. Miss McKenzie was also awed by the surroundings. She kept making comments in her Scottish brogue, and Elizabeth found her too charming by half.

For Georgiana's part, despite her protests, she seemed happier at home. Elizabeth could see that a calmness had settled about the younger girl's shoulders. She smiled more easily. After dinner, she regaled them with a long and complicated piano piece that was both beautiful and haunting, very lovely. Elizabeth was stunned by her sister-in-law's talent. She truly was gifted.

Later, they all retired to their rooms, and Elizabeth waited for Mr. Darcy, but he didn't come. They had never spent a night apart, not unless he had been away from her, or during that time when he had refused to reveal his secrets to her.

She told herself it didn't matter. They had separate beds for a reason, and he was likely tired after his journey. She retired to bed, determined not to worry over it anymore.

But she tossed and turned, and she couldn't sleep. She got up and left her bedroom. That was when she realized she had no idea where Mr. Darcy's bedroom was. She crept down the hallway,

looking into dark, empty rooms, and she found the suite that must belong to the master of the house. Mr. Darcy's clothes were in the wardrobe and a fire was merrily dancing in the fireplace, warming the room for him. But he was not there and the bed was still made.

So, she retreated.

She tried to convince herself to go back to bed, but now she was curious. Where was he? What was he doing?

So, she began to wander down other hallways, seeking him everywhere. She found the library, instead, and she was astounded at its size and breadth. She went through the room, gazing up at the shelves of books, feeling awed and pleased. Oh, *all* of these books? This was marvelous.

Then she turned around a shelf and found Mr. Darcy. He was sitting in front of a roaring fire, a stack of books on a table next to him.

He looked up at her. "Darling? How late is it? I have stayed too long, have I not? I apologize."

"What are you doing?"

"Reading." He laughed a little. "Will you forgive me for being carried away by a book? I did not mean to be distracted from you. I feel dreadful." He did look chagrined.

"In truth, I do know the spell that books can weave," she said.

He got up from his chair and went to her. "It is nothing compared to the spell you weave."

"I have no spells, sir." She gazed up at him. "I had thought... perhaps you were tired. Perhaps you wanted us to have a night alone."

"No," he said. "Perhaps someday I might wish that. Perhaps either of us would. I suppose it must happen. But I confess I can't imagine it. I can't imagine not wanting you."

She felt his words like a caress, and she pressed into him.

He kissed her forehead. "Let us retire, then, madam. Your room or mine?"

* * *

Elizabeth was surprised the duke's house was not as big as Pemberley, but she supposed that this was only a small estate that the duke held, not his largest holdings, which would be in Bellingshire. This was just a trifle to him, apparently. Darcy told her that the estate had been part of the duke's wife's dowry, as he understood it. It was a house that the family had retired to

sometimes in the summer or sometimes in the fall for hunting. It was modest by the duke's standards, but still grand to Elizabeth's way of thinking.

They were greeted at the door by the housekeeper, who recognized Mr. Darcy and greeted him warmly. She was happy to make Elizabeth's acquaintance as well, declaring them a lovely couple and so well suited. "No one is at home at present, I'm afraid," she said. "If you've come to see anyone, you'll be disappointed. I don't suppose you're here for a tour of the house?"

"No, no," said Mr. Darcy. "That's quite all right." He chuckled.

Elizabeth knew that she'd had a conversation with her aunt and uncle once of taking a holiday doing just such a thing, going to be given tours of grand houses. Mr. Darcy obviously thought it beneath him. Elizabeth felt a bit embarrassed, and then—as if by reflex—she felt resentful for being embarrassed.

This checked her, because she wondered if there was something in Mr. Darcy's accusation that she had a prejudice against wealth and status. If she did, she must school herself to let it go. She was his wife now, and she would represent the Darcy family. Such an attitude benefited no one.

Yes, Mr. Darcy was a proud man, but he was also devoted to her, and she could see that he was willing to be humbled for her sake. She must do the same.

"Do you know anything of the marquess?" said Mr. Darcy.

"Oh, the young master," said the housekeeper, smiling. "Why, he was such a beautiful boy. I don't know if you ever saw him running about on the grounds. That head of curls he had."

Mr. Darcy pressed his lips together.

Elizabeth spoke up. Clearly her husband could not wax complimentary about the marquess. She would have to do her duty instead. "You clearly care for him. He sounds like a sweet child."

"Oh, he was," said the housekeeper. "He and his mother would come here on their own, without the duke, and stay for months. He loved it here in this part of the country. He was such a happy child with her. They were so close."

"Ah, yes," said Elizabeth. "We know about the tragedy that befell his mother. So wretched. So senseless."

"Horrifying," said the housekeeper. "I like to think if she'd been here, it could have never happened. Our men on staff are quite vigilant. No one sneaks onto our grounds. No one would have hurt

her here.” She cast her face down, and her voice warbled a bit. “She was a good woman. Always kind to us. Always conciliatory. Treated us with respect. Listened to our concerns and advice. I couldn’t have asked for a better mistress.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth. “It is abominable what she went through.”

“Indeed.”

“Her son?” interjected Darcy in a dark voice. “Is he much changed from the boy he was?”

Elizabeth shot him a disapproving glance.

“Well, yes,” said the housekeeper. “I think the grief of it has permanently altered him.”

“In what way?” said Mr. Darcy.

“Well, in the way that grief does,” said the housekeeper. “He was here in the spring, and he was morose. Slept late in the mornings. Refused his meals. I don’t know. I can’t expect he would have behaved differently.”

“We spoke to his father,” said Mr. Darcy. “Before we came here, we sought the marquess with the duke.”

Something passed across the housekeeper’s face.

Mr. Darcy pressed on. “The duke said that the boy has run wild in the wake of his mother’s death. Do you think grief has pushed him to it?”

“He hasn’t run wild,” said the housekeeper in a quiet voice. “I should not put too much stock in what the duke says. He...”

“He what?” said Mr. Darcy.

The housekeeper looked down at the floor. “Perhaps we’d best leave this subject. Would you like to leave word of your visit? I can fetch you some paper and a pen and ink.”

“Why shouldn’t I put stock in what the duke has said?” Mr. Darcy said.

The housekeeper cleared her throat. “Please forget I said that. I don’t know what I meant by it. He is my master, after all, and he has never done wrong by me. He does not come to this house often. I don’t know much about him, truly.”

“It’s all right,” said Elizabeth in a quiet voice. She caught the housekeeper’s gaze with her own, gave her a reassuring look. “We would not repeat anything you say to the duke, we promise. It is only that is important that we find the marquess. If you have any idea where he might be, you could tell us.”

The housekeeper shook her head. “I don’t know. I have no idea.”

Elizabeth waited.

The housekeeper twisted her fingers together, as if she wanted to say something else but did not know if she should.

Elizabeth continued to wait, casting a glance to Mr. Darcy, trying to wordlessly tell him to be silent.

He was intently gazing at the housekeeper.

“The marquess... I don’t know if he wishes to be found,” said the housekeeper. “He came back through here, sometime in the summer, and he was very adamant that none of us betray his whereabouts. He took provisions and a horse and he left. He gets word to me, not through any means like a letter, anything that could be traced, but by travelers who come through and tell me of him, that he’s all right. I suppose, with his mother gone, he feels close to me and others at this house. We did so dote on him when he was a boy.”

“So, he is alive and well?” said Darcy. “But he’s in hiding?”

“Oh, I don’t know if I should have said anything.” The housekeeper sucked in a breath, looking frightfully guilty. “I don’t know where he is. I wouldn’t have any notion how to find him, but I do believe him to be well.”

“Hiding from whom?” said Elizabeth.

The housekeeper swallowed.

“Please,” said Elizabeth in a soft voice. “Does someone mean him harm?”

The housekeeper nodded.

“Do you know who it is?”

The housekeeper hesitated. Her face twisted, and then she nodded again.

Elizabeth opened her mouth to prompt her again, but the words died in her throat. The poor woman was in such a state at revealing all this.

“It’s the duke himself,” whispered the housekeeper.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“The duke?” said Mr. Darcy. “Surely the duke would never harm his own son!”

“I don’t know,” said the housekeeper. “I know that the duke has quite a temper, the likes of which you’ve never heard. When the marquess was here in the late spring, the duke sought him out, and they had an argument. They were shut up there, in that sitting room.” The housekeeper pointed. “We heard their voices, how loud they were shrieking at each other, but we couldn’t make out what they were talking about through the walls.”

“Well, family members argue,” said Mr. Darcy. “The duke himself has admitted to us that they had a rather bad row. I’m sure he would not do any damage to his heir. He has no other children, does he?”

“No,” said the housekeeper. “I would think the same as you, sir, truly, but in the midst of this argument, the doors burst open, and the marquess fell out of them. He’d been thrown out by his father, and the marquess was clutching at his own throat, gasping for breath, as if he’d been strangled.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “No.”

“Yes,” said the housekeeper, turning on Elizabeth. “I rushed forward, because we were all gathered out here. How could we not be when such a thing was occurring? I helped the young master to his feet, and he looked at me with terror in his eyes.”

“What did the duke do?” said Mr. Darcy.

“Left immediately,” said the housekeeper. “Took off on horseback without packing any of his things. He sent for them later. He has not been back here. And the marquess left soon after. He would not speak of what transpired between himself and his father, but when he told us that his father must not know of his whereabouts, I could not but think that it is all related.”

"It's rather curious," said Mr. Darcy. "Did the marquess tell you he feared harm from his father?"

"Not in so many words," said the housekeeper. "But he was terrified, I tell you. Terrified."

* * *

"It may not be new information," Mr. Darcy was saying. "I cannot think of a reason that a man might try to kill his only son."

Elizabeth was walking with him on the grounds of Pemberley. It was later that afternoon, and they were in sight of the duke's house as they ambled through a field. "Well, he did seem eager to find himself a new wife. Perhaps he intends to sire himself a new heir."

"Oh, that is villainy, Elizabeth. Did he seem that way to you?"

"No, he did not," said Elizabeth, sighing. "He seemed rather regretful and eager to repair things with his son. So, it does seem as if perhaps the marquess is overreacting."

"But if what the housekeeper says is true—"

"And she wouldn't lie. She didn't even want to tell us. We had to pry it out of her."

"Exactly," said Mr. Darcy, "so we can be assured of its veracity. But it also indicates that the duke did indeed make an attempt on his son's life. Perhaps he would not have gone through with it in any case. He does seem to have stopped. But if he did try to strangle his son..."

"Yes, that paints him in a bad light, doesn't it?" said Elizabeth.

"I can't say that it ingratiates me towards him," said Mr. Darcy. "I have a temper as well, but I would never lift a hand against those I love."

"I know you would not." She patted his arm.

"No, I find I cannot quite put myself in his place," said Mr. Darcy. "At any rate, I don't know what we shall do. How shall we find the marquess now?"

"Well, we must go back to the housekeeper and insist that the next time anyone comes to her with information about the marquess, she tells us so that we may question the messenger."

"She wouldn't," said Mr. Darcy. "She would not be the one who betrays the boy's location. She seems to love him, almost as if he were a son."

"What other choice do we have?"

"We can try it," he said. "But I think we must watch the house instead, and stop people coming away from the place on our own."

Question them until we find someone who will lead us to the marquess.”

“Could we not convince the housekeeper that we will not harm the boy?”

Mr. Darcy didn’t answer.

“Oh, you are not still set on dueling him? Or running him through?”

He turned to her. “Listen, madam, I know that you have become quite sympathetic to this fellow, given his angry father and dead mother and all that tragedy, but I am unmoved. What he did to Georgiana is villainy writ large and there is nothing else for it.”

“I don’t feel sympathy for him,” she protested.

He made a noise in his throat, of disbelief.

“All right, perhaps a bit of sympathy,” she allowed. “But I also agree that he has not behaved in a noble manner, that he has caused a great deal of pain. Be that as it may, I don’t hold with killing him. Promise me you’re not going to hurt him.”

“I’ll promise not to kill him,” said Mr. Darcy. “I can’t promise not to knock him down.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Fitzwilliam, truly.”

“He *deserves* to be knocked down. I don’t know what you want from me.”

“You’re being so... pigheadedly male about this, as if anything can be solved by punching each other or shooting at each other. I wish you would endeavor to be at least somewhat level headed.”

He turned away from her, staring at the duke’s estate. “There you go again, insulting me,” he said mildly.

“Well, it’s not as if you don’t have your share of choice words for me.”

“Heavens, that isn’t true.”

“You said that I was incapable of offering a good opinion of anything.”

“I would call that a very radical interpretation of my words,” he said. He pointed. “Who do you supposed that is?”

She squinted. There was a rider, heading towards the duke’s estate. He was galloping up the drive even as they spoke. “I haven’t any idea.”

“What if it’s the marquess?”

“Couldn’t be.” She paused. “Could it?”

“Let’s get closer.”

By the time they made it to the estate, the rider had tied his horse to a tree and gone to the door. This close, they could see that the man was not the marquess. He was much older, perhaps the age of the duke.

"Do you know who he is?" Elizabeth asked Mr. Darcy.

"No, I've never seen him before in my life," said Mr. Darcy.

They watched as the man spoke to someone at the door. The man was not asked inside. The conversation was brief.

Eventually, the door was shut and the man left the front door and went to untie his horse.

Darcy told her to wait there, and he hurried out to intercept the man.

Elizabeth went right on his heels. Did he even *know* her? She would not be ordered about and told to wait by anyone.

The man looked up and saw them approaching. He was startled. "H-hello?"

"Good afternoon," said Mr. Darcy. "My name is Mr. Darcy. I own the house just there." He pointed in the direction of Pemberley.

"I'm his wife," put in Elizabeth.

Mr. Darcy shot her an exasperated look. "Yes, this is my wife, who is likely deaf, for I am certain I told her to wait for me."

"Perhaps, dear husband, the fault is with your ears. Perhaps you thought you spoke, but did not, for I heard nothing." Elizabeth turned to the man. "What business did you have here?"

"My business would be my own," said the man.

"Are you reporting on the whereabouts of the marquess by any chance?" said Mr. Darcy.

"What do you know about the marquess?" said the man.

"Less than we'd like," said Mr. Darcy. "We are looking for him, you see. If you have any information, we'd be eager of it."

The man sighed. "The truth is, I came here looking for him as well. I have been looking everywhere I can think of, but I have not been able to find him. I'm afraid that the members of this household do not welcome me. I have a longstanding quarrel with the duke, and they bar me on his orders."

"Why do you seek the marquess?" said Elizabeth.

"I don't mean to be rude, madam, but that is my business as well," said the man.

"Oh, come now," said Mr. Darcy. "We are all friends here."

“Are we?” said the man. “I don’t know that we are.”

“Let’s be friends,” said Mr. Darcy, smiling. “Come to Pemberley. Join us for dinner. Stay the night. You seem weary from the road. Allow us to show you some hospitality.”

“Well,” said the man, “that is quite an offer. I shall say as Shakespeare does that my poverty consents, but not my will.”

“And I shall feed your poverty, not your will,” said Darcy, grinning widely. “What is your name, sir?”

“My name is Rothschild,” said the man.

“Mr. Rothschild, we welcome you,” said Elizabeth.

* * *

Mr. Darcy was not sure what to make of Rothschild. He would have preferred to keep everyone away from the man. He knew nothing of him, after all. He did not like having a stranger under his roof with his wife and his sister and all those under his protection. But he thought it was a risk that he must take because he sensed that Rothschild knew things that were very important about the marquess.

Rothschild was the key, Darcy knew it. Something that this man said was going to lead him to the man who had ruined his sister.

Rothschild, however, spent all of dinner growing drunker and drunker, drinking more wine than Darcy thought prudent. He was so drunk that Mr. Darcy did not wish to serve the man brandy after dinner, after the women had retired to the sitting room to leave the men alone.

Mr. Darcy could also see that Elizabeth was fuming when she had to leave. She was not the least bit pleased with the tradition that separated the men and the women after dinner, but there was nothing for it. He would tell her everything that Rothschild had said in her absence.

Rothschild called for brandy, however, and Mr. Darcy did not refuse him. He only sipped at his drink, eyeing the other man across the table. “Mr. Rothschild, come now, what do you know of the marquess?”

“Why do you care about the marquess?” said the man.

“I have business with him.”

“He’s little more than a boy,” said Rothschild. “What business could you have with him?”

Darcy hesitated. He considered a lie, but he wanted Rothschild to be honest with him. He could not, of course, betray it all for

Georgiana's sake, so he told part of the truth. "It concerns a young girl and the marquess. A girl for whom I have some responsibility. I need to speak to the marquess about his actions toward her."

"Oh," said Rothschild in a very different voice. "Well, I suppose he comes by all that honestly, then, poor boy."

"What do you mean?" said Darcy.

Rothschild sighed. "Listen, I don't know where he is. I swear to you. I am seeking him because I am concerned about his safety."

"Well, no one knows where he is," said Mr. Darcy. "The housekeeper says that he's hidden away."

"That is precisely what troubles me," said Rothschild. "Where is he? I fear he is dead." He grimaced.

"He's not," said Mr. Darcy. "The housekeeper claims he gets word to her, and that he is alive and well and in hiding. Who is it you think is trying to kill the marquess?"

"Why, the Duke of Bellingshire, of course."

"His father?" Mr. Darcy sat up straight. "You are not the first person to insinuate this. But why? Why would he do such a thing?"

"He killed her mother already," said Rothschild.

"What?" Darcy's eyes widened. "That is quite an accusation."

"I'm certain it's true," said Rothschild.

"How can you be certain?"

"I simply know," said Rothschild. "He put an end to the mother, and now he will put an end to the son. He is a vicious, ugly man."

"But why would the duke kill his wife?" said Mr. Darcy.

Rothschild got to his feet, and he staggered a bit. He put out a hand to steady himself, holding onto the back of the chair. "Forgive me, Mr. Darcy. I seem to have had too much to drink. I'm afraid I must retire for the night."

"Please," said Mr. Darcy. "But another moment. Tell me more of what you know."

"I have said more than I should have," said Rothschild. "I am glad to hear the boy is safe. If you should find him, sir, I would beg you to be gentle with him. I fear he has seen far too much unpleasantness in his short life."

* * *

Elizabeth wrung out her hands. "Oh, I would have given anything to be there, to ask him my own questions."

"I know that, darling," said Mr. Darcy, who was watching her pace in her bedroom. "But I have told you everything, and he went

to bed, refusing to say more. What do you think it all means?"

"I don't know," said Elizabeth. "I suppose I have some kind of idea about it all, but it only makes sense if Rothschild is correct and if the duke really did murder his own wife."

"It is a grim accusation," said Mr. Darcy.

"But it is not so rare that such horrid things happen," said Elizabeth. "Men do murder their wives, after all."

"Yes." Mr. Darcy was quiet.

"What I can't understand is what Rothschild has to do with it all," said Elizabeth. "How does he know these things? What does he care about the marquess? What is he doing here?"

"We shall speak to him in the morning," said Mr. Darcy. "We shall both corner him at breakfast and force him to explain himself."

"Yes, that's a good plan," she said.

"What about the idea you have?" He raised his eyebrows at her.

She opened her mouth to explain it to him, and then shook her head. "No, it's a bit overwrought. Let's wait until we can talk to Rothschild. We should get some sleep now."

"Sleep, hmm?"

"Well, we should get in bed, anyway," she said. "I'm sure we'll sleep *eventually*."

He gave her such a look that she shivered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

In the morning, Rothschild was gone.

Mr. Darcy questioned every single one of the servants, but he had not spoken to a person before leaving. He seemed to have simply spirited himself out of the house on his own, speaking to no one.

Mr. Darcy sent off a few letters, making inquiries about Rothschild. He thought someone must know who he was.

Then he and Elizabeth sat down in private with Georgiana and told her everything they knew.

“Did he ever seem afraid of his father to you?” Elizabeth asked Georgiana.

“No,” said Georgiana. “Not a bit, in fact. He never spoke of his father. He spoke of his mother, but it always made him sad. I don’t know what it all means. But perhaps he fled and didn’t come for me because he was in fear for his life, and if so, then perhaps I could forgive him.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Mr. Darcy. “If he’s truly in fear of his life, he should tell someone, not run and hide. It’s not as if there isn’t a law in England against murder.”

“Yes, but if it was his father,” said Georgiana, “then I hardly think that the word of the marquess would have been enough to arrest a duke. Bellingshire, he would have denied it all, and he would have been believed. And if he had killed his wife, I think he would have no trouble getting away with it.”

Mr. Darcy considered. “Perhaps. I still don’t think we should go about forgiving the marquess, however.”

“Well, not unless he was actually sorry,” said Georgiana. “But if he was, and if he still wished to marry me...” She let out a wistful sigh.

“Oh, you can’t be serious,” said Mr. Darcy. “I don’t even know what to do with you. How am I to go from wishing to kill this man to

welcoming him as my brother-in-law in the span of a few weeks? I can't do that. I forbid you from marrying him."

Elizabeth laughed. "I should think it would be an advantageous match. You would know he wasn't after her fortune, after all, and if they care about each other, why not?"

"She's too young to get married," said Mr. Darcy. "Far too young."

"Well, what do we do next?" said Georgiana. "How do we find Julian?"

"I don't see that we can," said Mr. Darcy. "Not until someone appears at the house next door, someone with knowledge of his whereabouts. We'll have to keep an eye. There is nothing further."

"Oh, I can't simply sit here and wait," said Georgiana. "You have to find him, Fitz. I charge you to find him."

"I shall do my best," said Mr. Darcy.

But that afternoon, a pall fell over the house as some news arrived in the form of a letter. It was from Mr. Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine, she of the masterful advice to the dreadful Mr. Collins. Elizabeth was not sure she was eager to meet this woman at all.

Mr. Darcy bent over the desk where he had spread out the letter. "I don't understand how she even knows where we are. We have but just arrived in Pemberley, after all. I think she must have spies somewhere. Oh, I have half a mind to invent an illness, and send word back that she must not come or she shall succumb and Anne besides, and then Anne shall likely die. Good riddance to that, however."

"Fitzwilliam!" Elizabeth was scandalized.

He turned on her. "You don't understand. My cousin Anne de Bourgh is the very devil herself. And Lady Catherine has always tried to marry me off to her, but I have soundly refused, only to have it fall on deaf ears. I can imagine they're both angry beyond words at my marriage to you. This visit is a punishment. Make no mistake."

Elizabeth cringed. That didn't sound good, she had to admit.

* * *

No illness was invented, because Mr. Darcy was too noble. And also because he said that it would only delay the inevitable. Lady Catherine was coming, and there was nothing for it. They would have to prepare for her.

And so, the household was put into a flutter.

Lady Catherine was very particular about everything. They had to have the foods she wished to eat, and the sitting rooms had to be arranged just so, and the curtains and bedspreads in the rooms where she was staying had to be changed, because she always insisted on staying in the same room but was scandalized if the place was decorated in the same way it had been the previous time she slept there.

At night, in bed, naked in Mr. Darcy's arms, he told Elizabeth stories about his cousin, who he had once witnessed drowning a hedgehog in the stream behind Rosings.

"She was not aware that I was watching," Mr. Darcy said in a halting voice. "I think I was so badly affected by it because of the expression on her face. Or rather, the lack of one. It was as if there was nothing there, as if she was empty inside."

Elizabeth was not sure how to take this. "Children are sometimes... wretched. They do awful things. Why, I once used a pair of spectacles on ants. You can concentrate the light and burn them."

"An ant is an insect, Elizabeth," he said in a tight voice. "This was something... you have never seen anything like it."

"I stopped because Jane started crying," said Elizabeth. "Did you ever see your cousin do something else? Besides, hedgehogs are rather... horrid, aren't they? How did she manage it with all the spines?"

"I don't think you're taking this seriously." Mr. Darcy's voice was grim.

"What would you have me say?" She twisted about so that she could look at his face, which wasn't especially easy considering how tightly he was clutching her. "Did she succeed in the drowning? One would think she at least got a few sharp jabs for her trouble."

Mr. Darcy sighed. "I made a noise, and she saw me, and the hedgehog got away."

"So, she did not kill it after all?"

"You are insistent on not finding this as disturbing as it should be."

"I am only saying, Fitz, that she was a child. You seem to be basing all of your dislike on this one incident. Perhaps she regretted it. Perhaps she was grateful, in hindsight, that she had not hurt the animal after all. I know that when Jane began to cry when I was hurting ants, it produced in me a great deal of shame. I saw my

actions in a different light.”

He peered down at her, tightening his arm around her shoulders. “This was the girl that everyone told me I had to marry. I resolved right then and there I would not, no matter who it displeased. Why, if a girl wishes to drown hedgehogs, can you imagine how ill-suited she might be at being a mother?”

Elizabeth reached up to touch his chin. “How old were you and you were already thinking of your future children?”

“Is that strange?” He furrowed his brow at her. “How often have you contemplated your future children?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, laughing a little. A ripple of something sweet went through her. “I suppose we shall raise them here, in this very grand house.”

“I knew you did not approve of Pemberley.” He sounded amused too, finally, now that the topic had shifted from his cousin.

“I do!” she protested, grinning from ear to ear. “Please stop assigning such dislike to me.”

He shifted onto his side so that they were face to face. He ran a finger over her bare shoulder. “In truth, I have not given detailed thought to my children. I have only always known that I must have them. I must have heirs, you know.”

“Yes,” she said and now her voice had gone quiet.

“What?” he said. “Something changed just now. You are subdued. Are you frightened at the thought of children?”

“No,” she said, and she wasn’t. “Lord, Fitz, we have been... active, have we not? There is every chance I have already conceived.”

He sucked in a breath at that.

“I was thinking about my own family, that is all. Heirs mean boys, and what if I don’t have any?”

“It will not be the same, Elizabeth,” he said, brushing her hair away from her face. “Pemberley is entailed, yes, but there are other properties I inherited which are not, and besides, I have a few other business interests, a bit of diversification into certain aspects of trade. So, never fear. I will be certain you are looked after, no matter what.”

“Oh, it is not that,” she said. “It’s not a fear of my well being. I know...” She sighed.

“What?” His finger went under her chin and gently lifted her face so that she was looking at him.

“It is nothing. I am fine.”

“I like girls, you know,” he said, smiling at her. “And the sex of our children is in the hands of God, is it not? We have no control over it. Please don’t fret. I can’t bear it when you’re sad at all.”

This made her smile. “I think that is an untruth, sir. You delight in frustrating me.”

“Delight? Is that fair? Surely not.” He dismissed this.

“I sometimes wonder if things went badly between my parents because of it. No boys, and they kept trying, and then they had to endure the strain of so many girls to marry off, and no hope for the future. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there is little harmony between my parents. I so wished for a marriage in which there would be mutual respect. I wanted to be joined to a man with whom I could be a true partner. I never wanted anything like what they had.”

“I can assure you, Mrs. Darcy, there is little chance of that happening. We are nothing like your parents.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, searching his gaze for the truth of this.

“I think that we are blessed, in fact,” he murmured, his voice dark and rich. “I don’t think any man in the whole of England could be as in love with his wife as I am with you, and being with you, it makes me happier than I can ever remember being. If we have ten girls, and they are anything like you at all, I shall be ecstatic.”

His words made her feel a lazy sweetness that stole inside her and unraveled her tension. “Oh, Fitz,” she sighed. And then she furrowed her brow. “Ten?”

“What?” He raised his eyebrows. “Is ten too many? It is only that I don’t know how I am ever to keep my hands off you. I seem to be frightful at that.”

She laughed. “Well, yes, there is that. We are rather wretched in that regard, are we not?”

He kissed her.

She opened her mouth to him, squirming against his body, glorying in their closeness. She needn’t have worried. This marriage might have started by mishap, but it was quite probably the best thing that ever happened to her. And she loved her husband. She adored him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lady Catherine and her daughter Anne swept past the gathered household who had come out to greet them upon their arrival. Lady Catherine declared that Anne was ill from the journey and that they must retire to their rooms immediately, that there could be no time for anything else and that neither of them would be in any state to come down for dinner that night.

Nothing was seen of either of their guests for the rest of that day, but their presence was felt by all, because of the constant demands that were made for their comfort. Anne needed a tea brewed of a certain leaf, and servants were dispatched to look for it. Lady Catherine decided that the room she was staying in—where she always stayed in Pemberley—was unsuitable due to the fact the windows faced east and would bring in the morning sunlight, and she insisted that another room be prepared for her, which was quite an undertaking.

At dinner that evening, Mr. Darcy was in a black mood, muttering things about Lady Catherine and Anne that were rather untoward, even going so far as to wish them both harm.

“Anne is never ill,” Mr. Darcy announced to every one that the table. “It is just an act she puts on to manipulate her mother, and to get whatever it is she wants. She pretends to be one way to Lady Catherine, shy and unassuming and sickly, but she is pulling all the strings, making puppets of everyone around her.”

Elizabeth was not sure what to make of this. Surely Mr. Darcy knew his cousin well, having been acquainted with her for her whole life, but she found it incredible to think that Anne could be so very, very wicked.

Later, she tried to get the truth from Georgiana, who told her a story about how Anne had once broken a vase in Rosings—on purpose, Georgiana said, that she had knocked it over with a laugh

—and then proceeded to blame the entire thing on Georgiana, who had been punished by her mother for carelessness. “I don’t like her very much,” said Georgiana.

Elizabeth was quite eager to meet Miss de Bourgh. She wanted to see what this girl was like for herself.

The next morning, when she came down for breakfast, Lady Catherine and Anne were leaving the dining room, having already finished their breakfast. They both looked her over coldly, and neither said a word to her.

Elizabeth smiled and said, “Good morning.”

They inclined their heads, both still wordless. They gave her such venomous looks that Elizabeth found it a bit comical and had to struggle not to laugh.

After breakfast, she found the two of them in a sitting room. But she was disappointed, because Anne spoke very little while her mother prattled on.

“Where is my nephew?” demanded Lady Catherine.

“I think he will be down soon,” said Elizabeth, who had left Mr. Darcy in bed. He had not been eager to see his aunt and cousin, but she had been, so she had dressed and come down early.

“Can’t you go and fetch him?” said Lady Catherine, scowling.

“Do you have something to discuss with him?”

“I only think it is rather hard, our being here and our host nowhere in sight. Quite rude. Your influence, no doubt.” Lady Catherine made a sound very like a snort.

Elizabeth straightened in her seat, unsure how to respond to such a bald insult. “You are saying that I influenced my husband not to see you? Why would I do such a thing?”

“I am saying that your station in the world is thus that you have no knowledge of proper etiquette, and that being too near you has likely caused my nephew to forget the lessons good breeding has afforded him.”

“Oh,” said Elizabeth. “Well, I assure you, your ladyship, that couldn’t be further from the truth. Were you not aware that my father is a gentleman? I have been well instructed in good manners all my life, I assure you. If Mr. Darcy does not come down, I think it must reflect on his opinion of *your* manners.”

Lady Catherine’s eyes widened. “Oh, that was insolent.”

“Was it?” said Elizabeth, all innocence. “My apologies. I should be quite sorry to cause you any discomfort. Speaking of which, how

is your new room?"

"Yes, acceptable, I suppose. Why I was put in that other room, I don't know."

"Seeing as you rose practically with the dawn, I hardly understand why you were not happy with the east-facing room," said Elizabeth.

"You wouldn't understand, I suppose."

"Because of my ill-breeding?"

"Precisely."

Elizabeth tried to stifle her smile and failed.

"I don't know why I am even bothering to engage," muttered Lady Catherine. "When we heard the news of what my nephew had done, my daughter and I both despaired, did we not?" She turned to Anne.

Anne gave her mother a timid look. "Yes, Mama," she whispered.

"My daughter was heartbroken," said Lady Catherine. "She had long ago fallen for her cousin. And the damage to the family name. The distastefulness of it. It is more than we could possibly salvage, I'm afraid. I resolved that we would not associate with my nephew's new wife, but then, after a bit of time to think, I realized that I must interfere for the sake of my niece."

"Oh?" said Elizabeth.

"Yes," said Lady Catherine. "There is nothing to be done about the disaster that is your marriage to my nephew, but we might still salvage poor Georgiana's reputation and station. If she could but marry well, it would be a distraction from my nephew's poor judgment. And I know it all. I know that you, a girl of loose morals, entrapped him into this marriage by your underhanded wiles. They say that he compromised you, but I am quite sure you are the one who engineered it all."

"Truly," said Mr. Darcy's deep voice from the doorway. "I would have asked for my wife's hand in any case, I think. The truth is that from the moment I laid eyes on her, I was smitten." He crossed the room to Elizabeth and settled down next to her.

She was sitting on a couch, and there was room for him to sit, but he sat very, very close to her and placed his hand on her knee.

She swallowed a noise of surprise.

Lady Catherine's eyes widened even more, something Elizabeth had not thought possible.

"Come now, madam," said Mr. Darcy, "we are all family here."

Apparently, we are all speaking whatever comes to our mind without heed for how it will be taken by others.”

Lady Catherine sputtered. “I am not here for you, though it is past time that you should appear to receive your guests.”

“I was ready to receive you yesterday when you arrived,” said Mr. Darcy.

“Well it is hardly my fault that poor Anne grew so ill.”

Mr. Darcy cast a dark, knowing glance at his cousin. “Yes, I suppose that may be true.”

Anne blinked at him, expressionless.

“I am here for your sister,” said Lady Catherine. “It is late in the year, true, but the Season will not begin in earnest until January, and there is still time to make Georgiana ready.”

“What?” said Mr. Darcy, furrowing his brow.

“You have botched your marriage,” said Lady Catherine. “But we shall marry your sister off well if I have anything to do with it. It is what your mother would have wanted. She would be appalled to see what you have married.”

“You will not speak about my wife in that way,” said Mr. Darcy in a pleasant voice. “I shan’t listen to it. If you continue, I shall quit the room.”

Lady Catherine sighed heavily. “Well, about Georgiana, then. Let us leave the subject of your marriage altogether.”

“There is no way you are bullying her into anything she doesn’t wish,” said Mr. Darcy. “She is still quite young, and she will debut into society when she is ready, and not a moment before.”

* * *

Mr. Darcy woke in the midst of the night to see that a figure was standing over his bed. He sat up at once, his only thought to protect Elizabeth, who lay next to him. He thought of the man who had gotten into the duchess’s quarters and slit her throat.

Of course, Rothschild had claimed that was the duke himself.

And anyway, Mr. Darcy could see that the figure was his cousin, Anne, and not some thief who had stolen inside in the night.

Anne looked at him in the scant light, expressionless, as was her way.

He flinched and felt around on the floor for his trousers, which he pulled on under the blankets before getting out of bed as quietly as he could. He was afraid all the movement would wake Elizabeth, but she was a sound sleeper. He rarely woke her when he left the

bed, and he didn't this time either.

He strode across the room. At the door, he turned to look at Anne.

She hesitated, and then came after him.

He went down the hallway to his own bedroom. There, he found a shirt in his wardrobe and shrugged into it. He lit a lamp. He surveyed his cousin.

She was looking everywhere but at him. Was she *blushing*? "Are you... have you covered yourself?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said curtly.

She raised her gaze to his, swallowing. "We don't... there is nothing for us to speak of."

"Why are you here? Why have you come to Pemberley? What do you want? You don't care a thing about Georgiana."

"I wanted to see *her*," said Anne, lifting her chin. "See your new wife, the woman you prefer to me."

"There has never been anything between you and me," he said. "I have made you no promises. I would wager to say I have been downright cold to you. You can't have really thought that—"

"She's pretty."

He folded his arms over his chest.

Anne fingered the edge of the bed jacket she was wearing. "I tried to think of ways to fix it. I wanted you to get an annulment, but I couldn't think of how to entice you into that. Then I thought I wanted her to die—"

"Are you *threatening* my wife?" His voice had become a growl.

She took a step back. "What do you think of me, Fitzwilliam? You think I would ever harm someone?"

He glared at her. "I think you would do whatever you needed to get what you want. But know this, Anne, I will *never* marry you, not if you are the last woman alive."

Anne nodded. "I know. I suppose when this happened, I finally realized it. You've never liked me. I've tried to tell Mama this, but she can be rather deaf. At any rate, I don't want you anymore, either."

"Oh, so that's why you sneaked into my bedchamber to watch me sleep."

"Her bedchamber. I didn't think you would be there."

"You were going to hurt her."

"I was *not*." Her eyes flashed with a bit of emotion, something

she rarely showed. "I only... I could never have been like her, you must understand that. Not with Mama stepping on every one of my words. I couldn't be witty and smiling as I verbally sparred with her. I don't suppose I would have ever stood a chance with you."

"You are a cruel and unfeeling sort of person. That is why you never had a chance."

She winced, only barely, but he saw it.

His nostrils flared. She was faking that.

"If I had known that was what you wanted, I might have tried." There was a hitch in her voice.

He shook his head. "If you think this is going to make me feel sorry for you—"

"I never want anyone to feel sorry for me!" Her voice was even, but firm. "I am not weak. Mama wishes to cast me that way, and I pretend for her, because it is the only way to have some measure of control when it comes to that woman, but I do not wish to be pitied. I have taken pains to show you that I am *not* weak. I never wanted pity, and I don't want it now. I didn't think you would be in the room. I didn't think you would witness me looking at her like that. I am... quite mortified." She picked at her fingernails.

He blinked.

"I shall take my leave of you," she said, turning toward the door.

He crossed the room and got in her way, blocking her path out of his room. "What is this? What are you playing at? You've made it plain to me over the years that you are the one controlling your mother, so don't act as if she—"

"Did I convince you of that?" Her mouth twisted into a little smile. "Good."

He narrowed his eyes. He didn't know what to make of this. Had he unwittingly witnessed some weakness in his cousin? Or was she putting on an act to ensnare him in some other scheme of her making? She always bragged about the way she manipulated her mother, but as he was gazing at her now, he wondered.

Was she truly a wicked mastermind, or a sad girl with a wretched mother who wouldn't have paid her any mind if she didn't invent illness and demand attention? Did she boast of her triumphs because she wanted to make more of them than they actually were? Maybe Anne was simply pathetic.

But he wasn't convinced. "So, you are saying that you came here precisely to see Elizabeth, to evaluate her? You put this idea in your

mother's head about Georgiana and a debut for that reason?"

"Let me go back to bed, Fitzwilliam. Please?"

"Answer the question. Why are you here?"

She shifted on her feet. "Oh, it is the middle of the night, and I am... If I had slept recently, perhaps I could make you believe that I had convinced Mama to come here, that it was all my idea, and that I was quite in command of the entire situation. But would you like the truth?"

"Of *course*."

"I mentioned to her that this Season was not lost, but I did not mean for my sixteen-year-old cousin, I meant for me. She never thinks of me. And since she had already shored up you as my future husband, there was no need for me to have a debut. So, that is why we are here. Because Mama *is* deaf when it comes to me."

He was not sure how to respond to this either.

"Oh, let me out, would you? What need do you have to trap me here? I have answered your stupid questions, have I not? You may go back to your pretty wife and forget all about me."

He sighed. He stepped aside from the door. "If I find you near her
—"

"What will you do?" she said, taunting him.

He clenched a hand into a fist.

She rushed out the door and into the hallway.

He extinguished the lamp in the room and followed her. When he was back in Elizabeth's room, he locked the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“You,” Lady Catherine was saying to Miss McKenzie. “You are from Scotland?”

“Well, originally, yes, your ladyship,” said Miss McKenzie with a bright smile. “But I had come to London to stay with family nearly five years ago, so I have been in this part of the country for some time.”

“Hmmpf,” said Lady Catherine. “My nephew ought to have spoken to me when he engaged a companion for my niece.”

Miss McKenzie’s smile wavered.

Elizabeth turned on the woman. “Miss McKenzie is quite accomplished with the piano, which is one of Georgiana’s greatest pastimes. And she has fit in with us rather splendidly.”

“Indeed,” spoke up Mr. Darcy. “Why, she was hired by my wife, and Mrs. Darcy made a marvelous choice.”

“You, my nephew, have been swayed by a pretty face. When this honeymoon phase is over, you will see exactly what you have done, and it will all be ruin. When Georgiana comes to stay with me, I shall procure a new companion for her.”

Mr. Darcy sighed.

Miss McKenzie’s face fell.

Georgiana screwed up her face. “Forgive me, Aunt, but I don’t recall being asked if I wished to stay with you.”

“I shall be taking over all the preparations for your debut,” said Lady Catherine. “We certainly couldn’t leave it to anyone else.” She looked pointedly at Elizabeth.

“I am not certain I want to debut yet,” said Georgiana. “There are... matters that Fitz is seeing to for me, and after I have some answers to questions I hold dear, then I shall make a decision. I should hardly think it would be this year. I could not. It is impossible.”

"There," said Mr. Darcy. "You see? Let us cease this talk. Georgiana will not be coming out in society this year."

"A decision like this should hardly be left up to a young girl," said Lady Catherine. "What she wants is immaterial. We shall do what is best for her."

"I have spoken on this matter," said Mr. Darcy. "I will not be changing my mind, no matter what you say."

A gentle rap came at the door to the sitting room, where they were all gathered.

"Pardon me, sir," said a footman, coming into the room, "but a letter has arrived for you."

"Oh, thank you," said Mr. Darcy, holding out a hand for it.

The footman handed over the envelope, and Mr. Darcy began to open it.

"Georgiana," said Lady Catherine in a wheedling voice, "don't you want new dresses and to dance with all the eligible men of London?"

Mr. Darcy uttered a sound of surprise, sitting up straight as he gazed at the letter.

"What is it?" said Elizabeth, turning to him.

He handed her the letter. "It is Bellingshire. You know I had sent out inquiries about all of this business? Well, someone has written to tell me about the latest news in this very strange saga."

"The duke?" said Lady Catherine. "What about him?"

"He's been killed," said Elizabeth, reading. "And they've arrested Mr. Rothschild for it."

"Yes, there can be no doubt he did it," said Mr. Darcy. "He marched into the house and shot him in front of all his servants."

"Who is Mr. Rothschild?" said Lady Catherine.

"Indeed," said Mr. Darcy. "Who is Mr. Rothschild? And why did he murder Bellingshire?"

* * *

The following day, midmorning, the household was stunned to receive a caller. A young man was shown into the sitting room. He had a regal air about him, but his mop of sandy curls was unruly, falling into his bright eyes, which settled eagerly on Georgiana the moment he entered the room.

Neither Lady Catherine nor Anne was there, having both complained of a headache and retired to their rooms. Miss McKenzie was afflicted as well, although Elizabeth surmised that

the governess was simply trying to avoid Lady Catherine's sharp tongue and had given her excuse before she knew that her ladyship and Miss de Bourgh would not be present that morning.

So, it was only Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy with Georgiana, and they both got to their feet at the sight of the young man.

Georgiana did too. "Julian."

He tried a smile, and then looked at his feet. "I'm sorry it has taken so long for me to come to you."

"You have a great many things to be sorry for," said Mr. Darcy in a quiet voice.

"Yes, I suppose so," said the marquess, or rather, the new duke, since Bellingshire was dead. "But allow me to explain."

"I don't know," said Elizabeth. "Why don't you sit down? I think we may understand more than you think. And what we know, you may not think you can reveal, because it would be dangerous to your new position."

Julian looked her over. "I'm sorry. I don't believe we've met."

"Pardon me, this is my wife, Mrs. Darcy," said Mr. Darcy. "Mrs. Darcy, may I present His Grace Julian Thorton, the Duke of Bellingshire?"

Julian twitched at the title. "I'd rather it just be Julian, if you don't mind. And I should like to speak to Georgiana alone."

"Not yet," Mr. Darcy said. "I am not sure if I wish to allow that."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Darcy," said Elizabeth. "He was prevented from coming back for Georgiana. He was in fear of his life. The late duke wanted him dead. We know as much."

"We do," said Mr. Darcy. "And we surmise that the reason for this is that the late duke was not your father."

Julian's eyes darted nervously toward the open door of the sitting room.

Mr. Darcy went to the door and shut it. "The duke discovered that your mother had an affair with Mr. Rothschild, and he was livid."

"The duke murdered her," said Elizabeth. "He slit her throat. At first, you believed the story that she had been killed by a thief, but then you discovered the truth. And the duke knew that you were not his son, but the son of Mr. Rothschild, and he had no use for you anymore."

"He wanted rid of you," said Mr. Darcy. "He planned for some accident to befall you, and then he would marry again and have

another heir, a true heir.”

Julian swallowed. “Is, er, there some reason you believe these things? Where did you hear—”

“Oh, we put it together ourselves,” said Elizabeth.

“But it took quite a bit of effort,” said Mr. Darcy. “I wouldn’t suppose that anyone else knows of it. It’s not a commonly held belief, if that’s your concern.”

“Well, it’s... ridiculous,” said Julian. “Of course I am the rightful Duke of Bellingshire.”

“We wouldn’t think to try to take that from you,” said Elizabeth.

“No, we wish you no harm,” said Mr. Darcy. “Mr. Rothschild, your true father, was looking for you all over the country, concerned for your safety. Finally, he decided that he must protect you, no matter the cost to himself. Had you ever even met him?”

Julian wouldn’t meet Mr. Darcy’s gaze. “Once or twice. I thought he was a friend of my mother’s. I didn’t know... well, there is nothing to know.” He lifted his gaze, a bit of defiance in his expression.

“He did what any father would do for a son,” said Mr. Darcy.

“And the late duke, he was a despicable man,” said Elizabeth. “If he was so truly concerned with his bloodline being carried on, he could have disowned you, divorced your mother. But instead, he was so concerned with his own reputation and how it would reflect on him to be a cuckold that he resorted to murder. I would say he got exactly what he deserved.”

Julian’s face twisted, but he didn’t respond.

“That is the reason, though?” said Mr. Darcy. “The reason you abandoned my sister? Because you thought he would kill you?”

Julian looked at Georgiana. “He threatened you as well. I told him about you, about the babe. He had come to the estate. We argued, and he was horrified that I had created some scandal. He told me the truth of it all, then, about what he had done to my mother. He said that if you were with me when he found me, he would destroy all of us.” He turned to Mr. Darcy. “You must realize, I found my mother’s body. I saw what he had done to her, the way he had brutalized her, and I... I could not but believe he was serious.”

“You should have told someone,” said Mr. Darcy. “If you and Georgiana had but confided in me—”

“Oh, what could you have done?” said Elizabeth. “There was so

much scandal, and the duke is very powerful. To bring it all to light would have been ruinous for everyone. You cannot blame Julian."

"I think it is up to me to decide whether or not I blame him," said Georgiana in a quiet voice. "Let us be alone now, Fitz. I have things I need to ask him."

Elizabeth turned to her husband. "Are you satisfied?"

"He has not even apologized," said Mr. Darcy. "Georgiana nearly bled to death when she lost your child, so—"

"Is that what happened?" Julian turned to her. "I had heard you were seen, that you were not with child, and I didn't know... I thought maybe you had been mistaken. I hoped... *Bled* to death?" His voice cracked.

"I'm all right," said Georgiana.

"I don't know that she is all right," muttered Mr. Darcy.

"I'm so very sorry." Julian's eyes had gone rather wide.

"I don't think I was in danger of dying," muttered Georgiana.

"I am..." Julian scrubbed a hand over his face. "You must have been so frightened. And I could not even send you word. I was afraid he would hurt you if I didn't cut all ties. I..." He went to her and knelt down next to where she was sitting. "This has been all my fault."

"Yes, it has," said Mr. Darcy.

"I took advantage." Julian bowed his head. "I was lost to grief, but that is no excuse. You are so very young, Miss Darcy."

"You are young too," said Elizabeth. "Are you yet eighteen?"

Julian shook his head. He would not look at anyone.

Elizabeth nudged her husband. "Let us leave them alone now."

Mr. Darcy hesitated. And then he nodded once, tersely.

They quit the room.

* * *

"He is very handsome," said Elizabeth. "No wonder Georgiana could not resist."

Mr. Darcy shot her a withering look. "You are not nearly hard enough on that boy, and you never have been."

The two were in the hallway outside the sitting room. They had been out here a very long time. Georgiana and Julian seemed to be deep in a long discussion.

"Well, I don't see what the use is in hating him," said Elizabeth. "He has asked to speak to her alone, and we know what that means, so you must find some way to make peace with him. I do not think

you will be able to avoid him after this.”

Darcy only sighed.

“Oh, I think this is good,” said Elizabeth. “We couldn’t have wished for a better outcome for Georgiana, I don’t think. He is here now, and he seems to truly care for her. Did you see the way he looked at her?”

“He is here now,” said Mr. Darcy. “But who knows with him? He has given her his word before and gone back on it.”

“Yes, but we know why,” said Elizabeth. “He had very little choice, I don’t think. If you were in his position—”

“I would never have been in that position,” he said, shaking his head. “I would not have taken advantage of a young girl to whom I was not married. I have more honor than that.”

Elizabeth gazed at him for a moment, and then she nodded. “That is true, Fitz. You would not have.” She closed the distance between them and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You are too carried away by thinking it some sort of silly romance,” Mr. Darcy muttered in low voice. “That he was so lost to desire he could not help himself, but that is preposterous.”

“Oh, indeed.” She dragged her hand down to his chest, smoothing her palm over his jacket. “You would never be overcome in such a way. You are always entirely in control of yourself.”

“That is not the same.” The bottom had gone out of his voice. “We are married. I made certain to marry you before I...” His gaze caught hers and his voice died entirely.

She felt a shiver go through her. “Thank heaven for that,” she gasped.

He kissed her, a hard, intense kiss that robbed her temporarily of her ability to stand straight. She collapsed against him, and his arms came around her to hold her up.

They might have gone on kissing like that for some time if they hadn’t been interrupted by a horrified shriek.

They broke away to see Lady Catherine there, with Anne trailing behind her.

Anne looked furious, her face a storm cloud.

Lady Catherine was so scandalized as to not be able to speak. “In the hallway? Where anyone could see? Fitzwilliam, you... you...” She could not even finish. She fumbled for her handkerchief and began to dab her forehead and neck with it.

At that moment, the door to the sitting room opened, and

Georgiana came out with Julian. They were both beaming, practically radiant.

“Well, I suppose I should speak to you, Mr. Darcy,” said Julian. “You are her guardian, after all, and I shall want your permission.”

“Permission for what?” said Lady Catherine. “Who is this?”

“Lady Catherine, may I present His Grace, the Duke of Bellingshire?” said Mr. Darcy. “Your Grace, my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

“Duke?” said Lady Catherine in a very small voice.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, madam,” said Julian. “I am inquiring after your niece’s hand in marriage, as it happens.”

Lady Catherine’s lips made a round O, but no sound came out.

“And as it happens,” said Mr. Darcy, “I am inclined to give my permission, since I can see that it is what Georgiana wants.”

“It is indeed,” said Georgiana, smiling wider than Elizabeth thought she had ever seen the girl smile.

“A duke,” said Lady Catherine. “My niece the Duchess of Bellingshire? Oh, my.” She put her handkerchief to her chest.

“Attend to me, Anne, I must sit down.”

“Doesn’t she approve?” Julian seemed amused.

“Ignore her,” said Georgiana, taking his hand and gazing at him adoringly. “Everyone one else does.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Since there was no need to plan an elaborate coming out for Georgiana anymore, Lady Catherine was eager to be on her way, and determined that she and Anne would leave in the morning.

Mr. Darcy was not sorry to see her go.

He had observed his cousin in the meantime, though, and he was still unsure of her. He thought her a manipulative creature who might have tried to sow seeds of pity within him, regardless of whether she would admit it to him or not. In fact, she might protest against wishing for his sympathy while intending to create it. He would not put it past her.

But she did not come near Elizabeth, nor did she attempt to engage anyone in conversation, claiming not to feel well.

Mr. Darcy decided that if she truly wanted a Season, that he might do what he could to help her along. After all, if Anne were married off to someone else, she could be busily attempting to manipulate that man, and Mr. Darcy wouldn't worry about her interference in his life.

So, that night, he told his aunt he wished for an audience with her, to which she agreed after much protestation about the inconvenience of it.

When they did meet, she was sitting in front of the fire in a sitting room upstairs, just a few doors down from her bedroom. She had a blanket around her shoulders, and she told him that she was wretchedly cold and that he must not keep an old woman from her bed.

Darcy had to admit that whatever was the matter with Anne, she'd had a manipulative mother to learn from. He sat down next to his aunt, endeavoring not to allow his annoyance with her show. "I shall be brief, I promise you. It shouldn't take long."

"Whatever can you have to discuss with me?" She sighed. "You

might have told me that Georgiana was being courted by a duke.”

“Well, he wasn’t a duke. He was a marquess. He didn’t become a duke until his father died.”

“Even so, had I known, I would not have bothered with this journey.”

“It seems to me that if you are interested in making plans for someone to come out into society, you might turn your attention to your daughter,” said Mr. Darcy.

She blinked at him. “Anne? Why, she is too sickly for a series of balls. I don’t think she’d like that.”

“Have you asked her?” said Mr. Darcy.

“Well, she and I would be more comfortable together at Rosings. Traveling to London at this time of year—”

“You would have been willing to do so for Georgiana,” said Mr. Darcy. “But not for your own daughter?”

A crease appeared between Lady Catherine’s brows. “I... well, that is, there has never been any worry over Anne. I knew she would marry you. But then you wrecked that rather soundly, didn’t you? I suppose she will have to find a husband, won’t she?”

“I repent of any pain I may have caused her,” said Mr. Darcy, trying to make this sound sincere. “I would be happy to see her settled and content with someone else. If there is anything I can do to help—”

“Oh, nephew, I am quite capable of handling this for my daughter, never fear.”

He smiled. “I had thought as much. Very well, I shall leave the matter in your capable hands.”

* * *

Soon, there were weddings galore. Elizabeth traveled with Mr. Darcy to see Jane and Mr. Bingley get married, and they had just missed the nuptials of Charlotte and Mr. Collins. It was somehow strange to be back at Longbourn. Elizabeth got the sensation that all of the places she was so familiar with were smaller than they used to be, as if she remembered them bigger.

But she was ecstatic to see her dear sister again, and Jane was incandescently happy, the most beautiful, glowing bride Elizabeth thought she had ever seen.

Mr. Bingley was blushing and grinning as well, happy to be congratulated by everyone, telling all who would listen that he was the happiest man on earth.

They would be quite content with each other, Elizabeth thought as she watched them exchange their vows. She was overcome with happiness, and she brushed tears from her eyes.

Jane's light blue wedding dress was trimmed in bits of lace, and she kept shyly looking up from beneath her eyelashes at her new husband and then looking away, as if his brilliance was too much for her to take. Mr. Bingley, on the other hand, gaped at her with obvious awe, as if she were some goddess he had been gifted with. He clutched her hand all through the wedding breakfast, barely letting Jane go so that she might eat.

It was altogether a marvelous day.

And then, only a few scant weeks later, she and Mr. Darcy were attending the marriage of Georgiana and Julian. They were getting married rather quickly, because neither of them had any desire to wait, and Elizabeth thought this was likely a good idea, since the two of them had shown no restraint with each other whatsoever in the past. It was better that they be married than to expect the two young people would be able to keep their distance.

Mr. Darcy had not been pleased about the early date of the wedding and even less pleased with Elizabeth's reasoning for why it should go on as planned. He had railed a bit, pointing out that they employed Miss McKenzie for this very purpose, suggesting that he and Elizabeth could take turns making sure that one of them kept their eyes on Georgiana at all times.

But Elizabeth said to him that the damage was already done, was it not? It was not as if Georgiana's virtue was going to be restored to her in any case. They might as well allow them to marry.

This did not entirely convince him. But after he had blustered about it for some time, the wind seemed to go out of his sails and he let the matter drop.

The wedding date was set.

These newlyweds did not look at each other the same way Jane and Bingley had. Even though they were much younger, there was something older and more jaded in their eyes. But when they looked at each other, Elizabeth could see the longing between them, could see the tight cord that bound them together, and that they had been through suffering and loss, both of them, and come out the other side. They were happier together than apart.

It was Mr. Darcy who seemed a bit choked up at this wedding, though he endeavored to hide it from her. She knew he was

affected by the sight of his young sister so grown up and leaving him.

Indeed, when they came back to Pemberley, it seemed empty, especially since Miss McKenzie had left for London and her relatives. She'd been cheery enough, however, and promised to write them both in the future.

For the first time in the course of their marriage, everything seemed calm. There were no turbulent issues on the horizon, no mysteries to be solved, no anger between the two of them.

Elizabeth rather enjoyed it.

One day, after Georgiana's marriage, a letter arrived from Mr. Wickham, making some outlandish demand or other. But Mr. Darcy told her he was going to refuse him. Georgiana was married now, and it hardly mattered as much. People already thought it was a bit out of order for a man as young as the new duke to marry, and the time between the engagement and the marriage had been rather short, and so there was nothing to shield the union from whispers. If people knew, it would be no worse than what was already being said.

No, Mr. Darcy was cutting Mr. Wickham off.

As for Miss Younge, he continued to send her money, but only because she was his blood. Perhaps someday, there could be some sort of reconciliation between them, he did not know.

If Wickham retaliated, there was no sign of it.

Everyone continued on as they had, in tranquil happiness.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“I hesitate to say anything about this.” Mr. Darcy’s voice was careful in the darkness.

“What?” Elizabeth murmured. “You know you can speak to me about anything.” They were both lying in bed together. They still spent every night in each other’s arms, even though they had been married for over eight months. She had long ago realized that they were not going to grow tired of each other.

“It is only that I have been thinking, and hasn’t it been a number of weeks since... well, since...” His lips brushed her shoulder. “I don’t wish to upset you.”

She smiled. “I’m not upset.” Truthfully, though it had not been a *very* turbulent issue, she had begun to grow concerned as each month passed by and she was not with child. She and Mr. Darcy were certainly, er, diligent enough that she had thought she would conceive very quickly. But time had passed, and she had begun to feel a nagging bit of panic about it, which had exploded once into a bout of sobbing, during which Mr. Darcy had held her and whispered to her that he didn’t care if they never had children, that she was all he wanted.

“I am firmly and utterly willing to cease speaking of it and go immediately to sleep, if that is what you wish,” he said quietly.

“I didn’t say anything yet because I can’t be sure. There have been no other signs except, well, as you say, it is late.” She smiled in the darkness, because it made her happy that he was so in tune with her body as to have counted the weeks himself, as to have noticed. And he knew, of course, because he was in her bed every night regardless. She had never been so close to another human being. Even her deep bond with Jane was not the same as this. Mr. Darcy was like... the other half of her. He knew every inch of her body, was well acquainted with all her freckles and dimples. He

knew just how to make her sigh or even squeal. And she felt as if she could tell him anything, and he accepted it, even understood it. He was hers, and she was his, and it was lovely. In some ways, she was glad of these extended months, just the two of them, before they created a babe together, because she felt as if it had only made them closer.

“Then perhaps there is nothing else to say, then,” he said. “We shall wait.”

“Yes,” she said.

He drew her close. “I meant it, you know. I don’t need children. I only need you.”

“If that is our fate, Fitz, we will come to peace with it.” She kissed his jaw. “But I do hope that I am with child. I can think of nothing more lovely than to see our babe in your arms.”

He sighed. He was happy, and she could feel it radiating out from him into the darkness, and his happiness surrounded her like a cocoon. His lips pressed into her forehead. “Whatever happens, we will be together, my darling. And that is all that matters.”

“Yes,” she said. But something within her was strangely certain, and she took his hand and pressed it against her flat belly.

And within her, the tiny life that had taken root was bathed in nothing but pure love.

* * *

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